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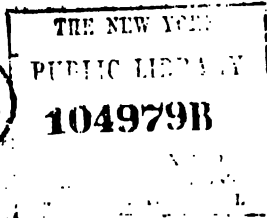
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SACRILEGE FARM

CHAPTER I

MARGARET

THE following history of the Honor of the Silvesters was related to me years ago by Margaret Donne, at the bidding of one whose wishes, to her and to me, were law.

And how hard the tale was to tell and to hear can only be known by us two, who then told and heard it. But he who stood aside and waited, deeming his own happiness to be in the balance the while, had a harder thing to bear than either of us, as I must believe, for so he has assured me. Though that this was so was his fault, for which he should have been blamed, if I could have blamed him then, or at any time, for that, or for anything.

For it betokened a want of faith in the power of the good which he was seeking, namely, the love of a woman, to render her strong to bear even a bitter knowledge for his sake.

Margaret herself knew better, when she told me her story, weeping for the old griefs which awoke and cried afresh within her as she named them, and for my sorrow as I learned them, but never for fear of any change which could be wrought in my heart because of them. For Margaret was wise as she was good.

Can you remember, when you were very little, before you had learned how to spell, or to picture to yourself words as they appear when printed or written, how the sound of certain ones would call before your inward eye a distinct image, or vision, of some person or thing?

There are words which, dating from that baby-time, have still such power with me, and one of these is the word so frequent in the ears of infancy—the word *good*. To hear it never fails to show me Margaret's face, crowned with dark hair beneath her white cap, the broad, smooth forehead, and clear eyes, the ruddy, high-boned cheeks, the firm, kindly mouth, and oval chin. For such was Margaret Donne when first I knew her. And although, when I see her now, her hair is white as her cap, her eyes dim, and her face wrinkled and shrunken, such while I live must still be my presentment to myself of *good*.

This Margaret was once my nurse. Later, she became nurse to my children. And always has



she been my friend. So that to be absent from her now fills me with the same vague sense of forlornness and want of ease which I used to experience years ago upon those dreaded occasions when it was "Margaret's evening out," and I was put to bed by the housemaid.

Country born and bred, Margaret was possessed of more good sense than of the lore which she yet whole-heartedly revered and admired in others, under the much-embracing title of *book-learning*. More experience had she than theories to account for her few, but deeply rooted, opinions and prejudices. More religion, in the shape of disinterested love to God and man, delight in good, and pity for weakness, than attachment to any form of ecclesiastical dogma. Warm of heart, she was often silent of tongue. Yet little children enjoyed her company rather than that of livelier companions. For Margaret's silence did not arise from stupidity, nor self-absorption, nor from any backwardness in understanding or sympathy, while the speech that came to her was apt to be worth uttering and remembering. Some of her quaint sayings have long been proverbs in our household, and she can still recite a song or a ballad after the manner of the *raconteurs* of old, upon whose words would hang the hearts of kings.

The story of the Silvesters, with whom she first took service, was told me by Margaret with a purpose, at a time when a Silvester, wooing me, would not have had me in ignorance of the grim history of his fathers, yet could not face the telling of it to me himself.

And who so fitted to relate it as Margaret?

For she had learned it herself painfully, as she taught it to me, by fragments which at the time it tortured me to have to piece together.

But I have since thought, with her, that this method may have been the most merciful, as well as the most just. For a truth that bursts too suddenly upon our sight is oftenest like a lightning-flash, that blinds rather than illuminates. And the suspense of morning twilight is, after all, but a kindly preparation to our blinking vision for the dazzling revelation of the day.

The facts and circumstances, then, which follow here, are set down to the best of my remembrance as Margaret related them.

And I wish that, for greater truth, I could give them in her own idiom and dialect, which were of the soil whence she sprang, but still more of herself. But I dare not attempt this, for as little could I hope to reproduce the charm of her sonorous voice, which was sweet and rough, like country wine, and always *sank* to passion. There-

fore, holding that even the much-abused translator is preferable to the gramophone, I will be content to endeavor to interpret what I must despair of ever being able to repeat.

The village of Stadwell, ten miles to the south-east of Oxford, was Margaret's home in the days when ten miles meant, to those who neither rode nor drove, some three hours of steady plodding through the dust or mud of high-road or by-way, so that urgent indeed must have been the business which would have led to such an excursion. Thus it happened that Margaret had reached the age of seventeen without having seen the city of towers, and without having more than thrice set foot in Ryeworth, her nearest market town.

Her mother had died when she was barely two years old, at the birth of another child who had survived but a day. And it was this unknown baby brother, Margaret told me, who had been the favorite playmate of her imagination throughout her own infancy, a doll being a thing of slight interest indeed beside the thought of him.

It was he whom she hushed upon her breast, crooning to him songs and stories by the hour, when seated upon her little stool beside the hearth. It was he to whom she taught his letters, when unenlightened persons might have supposed her to be learning her own. And it was to his rescue

that she flew when, upon sunny afternoons, the same little stool being set at the open cottage door, she would suddenly whirl from it into the roadway, to snatch the too-adventurous, invisible crawler from beneath the hoofs of Farmer Robson's mare, heavily lolloping between the rows of cottages, to the sheer amazement of onlookers, and the unaffected exasperation of Farmer Robson himself.

In those days had Margaret the motherless been cared for by "Mrs. Ussher, next door," in consideration of a small payment made by her father, Silas Donne, an agricultural laborer earning his weekly wage of twelve and sixpence. But, as soon as she could toddle so far by herself, she began to attend the dame-school near the church, where she learned to spell and to write after a fashion of her own, which throughout her life has differed from the one adopted by more conventional people; also to count, and to sew, knit, and darn very beautifully.

She never went to another school, for the reason which to her appeared adequate, that there was no other in Stadwell. So, having learned all that the dame could teach her, she remained at home, perfecting herself in housewifery under the direction of Mrs. Ussher, cooking, sewing, and washing for herself and her father, and, in pre-

cious spare moments, satisfying her more intellectual needs with the aid of the Advanced Spelling-book, and of the family Bible.

I asked her once how she had managed to come by such knowledge of the Bible that, if you started her anywhere in the Psalms, or the Gospels, in most of the Prophetical Books, or the Epistles, she was able to repeat almost word for word to the end of the chapter.

"My dear," she made answer then, "you'd have known it as well as me if it had been your only book—for the tales at the end of the Spelling-book weren't of very much account—or if you'd had to read a word letter by letter, and maybe say it over to yourself for half a day while you went about your work, before the meaning of it would come out."

For there were none immediately about her to whom Margaret could apply when such difficulties arose, her father and Mr. and Mrs. Ussher being, as she expressed it, "no scholars at all." And when the second Mrs. Silas Donne made her appearance upon the narrow scene of the girl's experiences, she did not hesitate to prove herself impatient of any question that was not of a severely practical description.

It must, as I fancy, have been a sore trial to Margaret when this stepmother of hers was

brought home to her. But it was a subject upon which she would not enlarge.

"She did her duty by me, as she saw it," she persisted in saying, "and she never had a child of her own, poor thing! to teach her what children are."

"Neither had you, Marget!" I cried. "And yet you know."

And Margaret, looking at me with puzzled eyes, kept silence, for she could not deny that I had spoken truth.

"Your mother left you her heart, dear, when she died," I whispered then, remembering the baby brother founded on fact, whom she had made belief to cherish, at an age when most little girls are whipping their dolls, "and that is why, ever since, you have borne a mother's heart to the little ones."

And Margaret, in all simplicity, replied, "Perhaps it is, dearie," and appeared to look upon the question as thus satisfactorily disposed of.

I am convinced notwithstanding, and in spite of Margaret's reticence—perhaps because of it—that her stepmother was hard upon her, extorting as much as she could get from the willing child-laborer, and discontented in the end because the laborer, however willing, was after all but a child.

And Silas, of whom his daughter spoke with

an affection that seemed made more than half of pity—I seem to know him too, having met his like over and over again in poor agricultural districts: an inert man, worn and aged before his time by uncongenial toil, slow of movement and of wit, patient of suffering for himself and others, not at all a man to whom his child might hopefully have looked for protection or support.

Margaret referred so often, and with such insistency, to the forbearance of Mrs. Donne in not sending her out before the age of seventeen to make her living amongst strangers, that I shrewdly suspect the good lady herself of having been by no means unconvinced of the generosity of her own conduct in the matter, nor backward in pressing such conviction upon others. But, for my part, I do not pity her. For I imagine that Margaret from infancy was likely to have been worth her keep at home.

A time came, however, when she could be kept at home no longer. For poor Silas “went down with the rheumatics” in the early autumn; a misfortune which promised ill days to his family during the ensuing winter. Mrs. Donne, who, to her justice, spared herself as little as she spared others, then earned what she could by doing “a bit o’ washing,” or other odds and ends of work for her neighbors. But such jobs are poorly

paid, even when they can be come by, and it presently appeared clear to the reluctant eyes of all three that, if the wolf was to be kept from the door, or themselves from the workhouse, Margaret must "go out."

"I'll take you to Ryeworth hiring-fair myself, after Michaelmas," pronounced Mrs. Donne.

And Margaret answered, "Yes, mother," meekly, albeit with a sorely fluttered heart. While Silas, though he might look wistful, said nothing.

What, indeed, was there for him to say? In these days of his weakness and suffering, he could ill spare his gentle nurse. But there was no use in contemplating that side of the question. And he knew it.

CHAPTER II

RYEWORTH HIRING-FAIR

MARGARET could never speak without a shudder of the day when she stood in Ryeworth Market Street, upon the occasion of the autumn hiring-fair.

One may imagine something of what the ordeal must have been to a girl home-bred, and hitherto so closely kept to home that she had seldom walked the length of her own village, except to church on Sundays; to whom the view from her threshold of the hills and fields around her birth-place was as a book, open indeed, but writ in an unknown tongue; and to whom the encounter of a strange face was almost as disturbing as it was rare.

For it was such a girl who was to be set forth now in the blaze of public scrutiny, to have her points appraised and valued, to be criticized, depreciated, and haggled over, to be practically as much bought and sold as any of the beasts, lowing, bleating, or grunting in the pens up the road, beyond the market cross.

"What *did* you do, Marget, when you found yourself there, being looked at by all the people?" I asked her. And Margaret gave a half-smile, with a shake of her head, as she answered:

"I behaved very silly at first, I'm afraid. For I tried to hide myself behind stepmother, till she gave me a pull, and bade me stand out and not be a fool! And I knew she was in the right of it. So I didn't try to hide any more after that, but I couldn't help going on being a fool, for that was the way I was made, I suppose, and so every eye that fell upon me had a stab in it, as if it had been a knife."

"And did all the maids find it as hard to bear?"

"Indeed they didn't! There were one or two, indeed, shy, gawky things, the same as myself, and some—sullen, or what—who wouldn't show to care a pin one way or the other. But to the greater part it seemed quite a bit of fun. They were all the time exchanging nods and smiles with the young men—the shepherds, with tufts of wool in their hats, and the carters and plow-boys with their whips beribboned—who stood down the other side of the street. And there was one who would set herself over there, at the side of her lad, they being promise-bound to one another to seek service together. And I for-

got my own troubles enough to be glad when a miller from our parts hired the two, and they walked off together, hand in hand, though their ears might have tingled to hear the laughter and the jokes that were being passed about them.

“Oh, there was a plenty of fun and laughing! For as soon as any had got settled with master or mistress, and had been to the public-house to get signed, off they would go to amuse themselves among the Aunt Sallies, and shows, or ginger-bread stalls, which were arranged down the middle of the wide street. I envied them their merry hearts, I know! But most I envied the girls with mothers to be careful of them, who spoke up for them, and took them away presently, to buy a shawl, or an apron, or something to fit them out. And then I looked at stepmother, and thought shame to myself to be grumbling, with her standing beside me till she was stiff, and the shadows darkening round her eyes.”

“But what were the stupid people about, Marget,” I burst out impatiently, “not to have snapped you up at once?”

She laughed. “I was no morsel to snap at, dearie, with my awkward figure too big for my clothes, and my foolish, frightened face! And then, when they asked me what place I had filled,

I was bound to tell them that I'd never been in one yet."

"And more shame to you," one woman cried, looking at my long legs, and the strong, red hands hanging by my sides.

But then stepmother up and spoke for me so that I was astonished.

"Yet it's not her fault, mum, if she hasn't. For she's worked harder than a servant at home for her father and me, so that up to now we've never felt able to do without her."

Now, I had never heard stepmother speak a word to praise me like this before, and it made me so glad and so sorry, and so proud and ashamed at once, that I blushed till the tears came into my eyes.

But she nipped me sharp by the arm, as the woman turned away, and told me through her teeth never to say again that I hadn't been out before. I might say that I'd worked for Mrs. Ussher, next door.

"But that was when I was nothing but a baby—and I never got wages for it," I whispered back, in a fine pucker if I wasn't to tell the truth.

And she answered, no matter about any wage. Wasn't it true that I'd worked for Mrs. Ussher?

Well, it was. But I knew that it wouldn't

be true to say it in answer to such a question. And my heart dropped like a stone in water, for it was the first time that the way to do right hadn't looked plain, if it had looked hard, and so I fairly trembled the next time that a mistress stopped to speak to me.

This one, however, had said nothing about any former place before she fell into an argle-bargle with my stepmother over my clothes. And they were shabby enough, to be sure, though well patched, and clean, and the only ones I had.

But "You don't expect me to have her looking that figure?" she said. "Like a skinned ewe in a lamb's fleece!"

My poor stepmother's white face turned red with anger. But she couldn't afford to say a sharp word back. So she tried to smile at what it was easy to see she looked on as a very bad joke, while she murmured something about a little advance of wages. And yet she knew, as well as I, that we could ill spare any of the wage that I was to get, for finery to my back.

But the woman tossed her head, and pursed her mouth up hard, saying that we must think of a better plan than spending her money before it was earned.

"Well, she shall have my dress," said stepmother, then, in extremity.

And at that I cried out that I would never live to strip her!

And she back and told me, with a face like iron, to hold my tongue till somebody asked me to speak, and *then* I might do as I was bid.

But by this time the mistress had caught sight, further on, of a rosy-cheeked lass in a nice blue cotton gown, and a sunbonnet to match it. So she moved off to where she was. And I thought that stepmother would have beaten me, then and there in the street, she was in such a way at my having let a chance slip, as she said.

Well, so there I stood, half dazed with the misery of having done so ill, and thinking of the wasted day, and of poor old father alone by himself all this time at home, until, still in a stupid, unthinking kind of way, I had begun to watch a strange figure of a man, who was going about, in and out of the crowd near to us.

He was taller than any of the men around him, and broad to match, though stooping a little from the shoulders. And his hair, which was thick as a lad's, was gray, and so was the stubble about his chin, and his eyebrows too, under which his dark eyes flashed of a sudden, like the sparks that will flare out sometimes in a handful of white wood-ashes, when you fancy they're cold. His dress was that of a farmer, but threadbare and ill seen

to, so that I noticed here and there a button wanting, and his neckcloth would have been no worse for a visit to the wash-tub. Still, I fancied that he might be something higher than he seemed, for his face—though it was neither a good nor a pleasant one—was molded like the faces that come with blood, and he had a way with him too that was the same.

Yet his manner of going about his business in the fair was so queer as to tempt more than one young woman to give a giggle, with a nudge to her neighbor, when he passed. For he looked as if he could scarce bring himself to speak to any, or, if he did, he would glower at her, with such fierce eyes, that I wondered where she got the courage to answer him.

He seemed to find it hard to get suited too. At first it was to the older women that he spoke. But one turned pale at his approach, and from the first would have nothing to say to him. And he sneered in an ugly way as he left her, and scowled back at her over his shoulder when he caught her whispering to another, who was holding up her eyes and her hands.

With the next, a quiet-looking-body, he seemed to be getting on better, till, at some word from him, she looked first astonished, then alarmed, and finally turned her shoulder on him, shaking her

head very decidedly when he seemed trying to induce her to hear more. And at that, stamping his foot, he walked off, as though he'd have no more to do with any of us.

But, having walked a few yards, he walked slower. And then he stopped. And he ended by coming back, slowly, and frowning so that he was twice as ugly. And yet now, somehow, I felt more kindly to him, for I seemed able to tell by my own feelings how it was with him—how he felt with all those curious eyes upon him, and how hard speech came to him. And I thought the better of him because, when he had once got off, he had made himself turn about to come back again. And at that moment he lifted up his eyes, and they met mine, and he came straight to where I stood.

“What's your name, girl?” he said.

I was so flurried at his speaking to me that I could scarcely tell him, “Margaret Donne,” with a curtsy.

“Do you want a place?”

And to this I answered, “Yes,” like a fool, never so much as waiting to ask what place it was to be! Yet I was most astonished with myself afterward, because I had felt no fear at the notion of service with such a master.

But here my stepmother began to nudge me,

because I had forgotten once to say *sir* to him. And, with her lowest curtsy, she set to work to try to cover my want of manners with a recital of all my good qualities.

“She may look but a chit, sir, but she can cook, and sew, make, bake, and wash like a woman. And a steady, good girl, though I say it, for she’s had a good bringing up, and a good example. Not flighty, like some of the pieces that aren’t so very far off, but meek, and industrious, and honest——”

He stopped her before I might hear more of what was news indeed to me. And certainly I had heard enough for my comfort.

“You are to wait upon a lady,” he told me, turning his back upon my stepmother, “and she is often weakly and complaining—are you a chatterbox?”

The question, so flung at me, startled me so that I could scarce stammer out a “No, sir!” But my stepmother, who seemed to look upon this as a very poor answer, lost no time in amending it.

“Oh, sir, I’ve never let her talk! If there was anything you didn’t want said again, she wouldn’t think even so much as to——”

“I want her to say *nothing*! Will she obey me in that?” roared the strange old man, with

such a voice and look that stepmother trembled as she answered, "If you please, sir!" and for the present said no more.

"My name is Silvester," he went on then, more gently, "and I live in the farm two miles up, over the Red Hill toward Budhampton. Will you be there to-morrow?"

I looked at my stepmother, who, cowed and flustered as she had been, yet kept enough presence of mind to remember the question of wages, and plucked up spirit timidly to inquire of the same.

"Well," returned Mr. Silvester, "I'm not a rich man, and if I were—" He smiled grimly, while he ran his eye over me, before he said, "Shall we say six pounds for the year?"

A glance at my stepmother—the bargain being her affair—showed me that she was overjoyed. But she was a great deal too shrewd to confess it.

"Paid quarterly?" she inquired. "And everything found? Well."

On this Mr. Silvester turned away, apparently very much relieved at having done with us. But my stepmother sprang after him.

"Sir! you've forgotten that you and I have to go and sign the paper."

He muttered an impatient oath, and I thought

at first that he would have refused. But he gave in.

“Go on, then, I’ll follow you.”

So she walked in front, as he made her, though she apologized to him for so doing. And I could see, by the way she was setting her feet, how pleased she was.

I followed them into the Red Lion, where there were plenty like ourselves signing their agreements as master or mistress and servant. And I, being under age, was bound by my stepmother, before witnesses, to Cornelius Silvester as his domestic servant for the space of twelve calendar months.

It seemed to me, standing aside and doing nothing but watch the others, that Mr. Silvester’s manner before the people of the inn, and the rest coming and going round us, was even more shy and savage than it had been before. And I thought that some odd glances were thrown at him, and at me too. But nothing was said to explain them till we were about to leave the house, Mr. Silvester having hurried out before us as soon as the writing was done. Then the landlady, a kind-seeming body, who had been looking at me pretty hard, stopped my stepmother in the doorway, to ask her if she knew anything of Mr. Silvester.

"Never set an eye upon him, nor heard his name, till ten minutes back!" laughed she, in high good humor now. "So it can't be said that I've wasted time, can it, before putting his shilling in my pocket?"

For a maid or a servant lad in those days took the earnest of a shilling from those hiring them in the fairs, as a recruit does now from the sergeant.

"Not a place where I'd have a girl of mine go!" mumbled the landlady in her ear, but so that I could hear her.

"It's late to tell me that now!" returned my stepmother, with some truth. "But," she went on, taking fright all at once, "do you mean that an honest girl's name would get any hurt in his house?"

"Isn't it late for you to ask that now?" inquired the landlady rather sternly. "But no, I don't mean that. Only there are strange stories told here about Sacrilege Farm, as the people call it."

My stepmother tossed up her chin, and spoke rudely, I believe to conceal her uneasiness, for she would have been loth to see harm happen to me.

"If that's all, I won't trouble you to repeat them, for my girl and I have more to do than to be listening to *strange stories!*"

Then she swept me before her into the street, where she began talking fast about the shows and the merry-go-rounds, and the idle good-fornoughts, as she called those who were taking their pleasure in them, as a means to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling which the landlady's words had left behind them. And, meeting the woman who had shown such scorn of my clothes, step-mother asked her whether she had found a girl yet who would serve her for a chimney ornament? And she smiled and curtseyed her politest when the other replied by a black look.

"Mother," said I, for I called her so sometimes, "do you think to spend some of that shilling on a fairing to take back to father?"

And I could have hugged her with gratitude—only she'd have taken it ill, especially in the open street—when she let me have the whole of it to buy him tobacco, and the sweets which he loved to mumble and melt in his mouth, like a child.

It was late, however, before we could turn home to him, for we had to wait for the carrier, because my stepmother couldn't walk the distance; and she was so thoughtful for me as to make me ride too, because I should have to trudge it to Mr. Silvester's on the morrow, when the carrier didn't go. And he, having got drinking in one of the low beer-shops of the town, wasn't in his place at the

appointed hour. So, rather against my inclination, we followed him there, to hurry him.

The beer-shop was so crowded with drinkers, and the air so hot, and thick with the reek of tobacco and liquors, that it made us catch our breaths, going into it out of the freshness of the evening. And there was our carrier, quite forgetful of his duties, till stepmother put him in mind of them, listening to a fat man singing a song, while another played upon an accordion, and a crowd joined in the chorus, some of them laughing at nothing, and some as solemn as funeral mutes, according to the way in which the drink took them.

But apart from these, with his back turned to us, was sitting a tall, gray-haired man alone; and he was drinking like a man who drinks for a wager. For he poured from bottle to glass, and from the glass down his throat, almost without a pause, while another bottle stood beside his elbow, empty. He emptied the second before my stepmother had finished persuading the carrier, and the slatternly maid, who was passing, asked him if she should bring him another—I thought she might have taken shame to herself to do so!

For answer, he counted money from his purse into her hand, his own moving by jerks, as if it had belonged to a clockwork figure, so that twice

he dropped a coin. But he made the grinning girl pick it up each time, and I'll warrant she got no more than the bare price of the drinks from him.

Then he tried to rise, but he had to make three efforts before at last he got to his feet, when he lurched to the door, with as little heed of those who stood before it as if they had been so many three-legged stools. And I noticed that even the tipsiest made way for him.

But as for me, I shrank back against the wall, holding my breath for fear, while he stumbled past me into the twilight. For, when he turned, I had seen his face, white even in the heat of that room, and the eyes in it like live coals. And it was the face of my new master!

Then my stepmother came forth, all red and panting, as she drove the swearing carrier before her to the stable-yard. And I like to think that she had been too busy with the task of weaning him away, to have been able to observe anything there beside him.

CHAPTER III

THE SILVESTERS, ACCORDING TO MRS. JANAWAY

It was early the next morning (Margaret continued) when I left my father's house. And I had some ado not to go out crying from it, which would have been unlucky, as well as a want of faith, after I had committed it, with those within, into the hands of God.

But it seemed to me that father was looking older that day, and more feeble than ever I had thought him before. And he had said nought to me when I had kissed him, but clung to me, with his knotted old hands all of a shake, so that I could never have borne to have loosed them. And I don't know how long I might have lingered, if my stepmother hadn't scolded us both, hurrying me off, so that his hands dropped suddenly from me, while still he said no word.

She had been scolding me for one thing or another ever since she had called me from my bed, which I thought hard at the time, but I believe now that it was just because she was feeling sorry for me, and perhaps a little sorry to lose me,

and that it was her way to scold when another woman might have wept.

I didn't dare to kiss her, but just said, "Good-bye, mother!" taking up the bundle which was tied in one of my blue aprons, and went out from the door with a hanging head.

I thought that she might have stayed just a minute to watch me down the street, instead of running back that instant into the house, as she did. But I hoped that she had gone to comfort father, and that she wouldn't think to say anything sharp to him, supposing she saw the tears in his eyes.

However, in a minute I heard her calling me again, and there she was at my back, with her hands full of victuals, scolding again, so that you might have heard her the length of the street.

"You silly thing!" she cried. "Going without your breakfast. Now, don't tell me! I saw you, and you didn't swallow a morsel of it. Take this, do you hear? Now just do as you're bid, and don't always go thinking that you know better than everybody! Take and eat it as you go, or how do you suppose that you'll win to Ryeworth, and on up, with nothing in the inside of you? That's right! Then be away, and don't dawdle!"

She pushed me from her. But I went more lightly now, for I felt how kindly she had meant

all the time. And there were Mrs. Ussher and the children, run out to wish me good luck. And her husband, starting to his work, walked with me to the end of the road, telling me how I must be a good girl, and obedient, and truth-telling——

“And oh, Mr. Ussher!” I cried, interrupting him I am afraid, but my heart too full of one thing to give me peace to listen to him, “if you would give a look-in at father now and again, just to keep him from fretting——!”

And, “No fear!” cried Mr. Ussher, cheerfully. “He won’t fret, not after the first, no more than a babby. His mem’ry’s going. Seems to me like he’s breaking up.”

Well, my dear, Mr. Ussher was a good-hearted man, and that he meant well I have no doubt, and in my heart I’d known all the time as much as he said. But to hear it put into words that way was like a stab from a knife, and brought my tears back again.

However, there were a two-three more of the neighbors looking out of their doors, and I had to reply to their farewells, and put on the best face I could to do it with.

And when Mr. Ussher had left me, and I was alone and away from the houses, where the milestone pointed eleven miles to Oxford the one way, and seven miles to Ryeworth the other; and when

I saw the white highway running between the hedges, and the elms shining like gold in the sunlight out of the pale morning mist, and the spider-webs all asparkle between the thorn branches, and the yellow-hammers after the berries—then my grief, which had been up in my throat choking me, dropped down into the bottom of my heart, like a bird to its nest, and I knew that I could bear it. And my eyes stopped smarting, and cleared, so that I might see the world as God had made it, *very good*, with all its trouble. So I marched on, with my head up, and the sun in my eyes, singing *The Lord is my Shepherd*, for myself, and *The Lord hear thee in the day of trouble: the name of the God of Jacob defend thee*, for my father, till I came to the outlying houses of Ryeworth town.

The market street, when I entered it, looked strangely empty after the bustle of yesterday, for most of the show-stages and booths were gone. And those that remained were all in pieces, and were being piled on to wagons by tired, dusty-looking men and women, while dark-eyed children jerked at the horses' heads, or gave back the stares of the little boys and girls of the town.

And now that I stood in the middle of Ryeworth, it struck me for the first time, as I'm sure that it had never struck stepmother at all, that I didn't know which way out of it I had to take

to come to the Red Hill! But, as luck would have it, while I was turning this way and that, and afraid of my life to speak to anybody who might have directed me, I saw a light cart, driven by a woman, jogging up the street, and the name in white paint upon the back of it was *T. Janaway, Red Hill Farm.*

So I was glad to put my best foot foremost after it, though I was tired enough by this time, being unaccustomed to long walking, and my arms ready to drop off with the weight of my bundle, however light that was to be my all.

I could scarce do it, but I managed to keep the cart in sight, or at any rate in hearing, while now and again I caught a glimpse of the woman's bonnet above the walls and hedges, till presently she turned the horse into a side road leading upward, and jumped down to walk the hill.

And it was so steep, and the road so rough, and both the horse and its mistress were taking it so easy, that I managed to overtake them there. But no sooner did the woman see me than she stopped, calling out in astonishment as she did so:

"Fie, what a red face! And where are you going, my girl, in such a hot hurry?"

I was panting so that I could scarcely speak, but I dropped my curtsey, making shift to reply, "To Silvester's, if you please, ma'am." And I

added, as I gained breath and plucked up heart, "And is this the right way to it, please?"

She looked more keenly at me as she made answer slowly, "Yes, you're right for Silvester's." And then, "Put your bundle into the cart," which I was glad enough to do.

She eyed me again, while I bent my arms back and forth, for they ached worse than ever now that the strain was off them, till she said,

"You're a stranger here by seeming. And how far have you traveled then?"

I told her from Stadwell, hoping that Mr. Silvester would not have set me down a *chatterbox* for so doing. But she was such a good-looking, decent woman, and I was so grateful to her for taking my bundle into her cart, that I should have found it hard not to give a civil answer to her question.

"And what are you going to Silvester's for?" she asked next.

I longed to tell her, as Mr. Silvester had told me, *To wait upon a lady*, for the words sounded well, I thought, and I should have liked to repeat them. But, considering that in this case perhaps least said was soonest mended, I contented myself with replying merely that I was a servant.

"And," I added timidly, both because I wanted to know, and because it might be safer to

ask questions than to answer them, "If you please, ma'am, may you be acquainted with Mrs. Silvester?"

She looked more strangely than before at me, while she shook her head.

"I am not. And no more is anybody in these parts, that I know of. But I'm sure that from my heart I pity the poor young thing!"

"*Young?*" I cried, thinking of Mr. Silvester's gray hairs.

"Yes, young. Why not? Though a widow before she had ceased to be a bride, as one may say."

"Then she isn't the old gentleman's wife?" I went on, growing more interested, and more hardy as I became so.

"Nay! What are you thinking of? Why, the old gentleman's wife has been dead these twenty years! Mrs. Silvester is his daughter-law, and was wife to the murdered man."

Hearing this, I stopped short, and I daresay that my face changed, for she cried out, seeing it,

"Why, child, are you going to Sacrilege Farm with no more knowledge than this about the folk there? How comes it so?"

But I could only repeat her word—"Murdered?"

"Now," she said uneasily, "don't you go and

say that I called it so. For it might bring me in libel against the dead, in a court of law, for what I know. But it's what every one about here thinks, if they don't say it. And I'll be bound the police think the same, though they can't prove it. There are not many to be found believing that story of the fire. You heard that he was burned, I suppose?"

"I have heard nothing—I know nothing—Won't you tell me?" I cried, in an agony, as I remembered the hints of the landlady at the Red Lion.

"Well, then, I declare I think that you should know. But I'm puzzled where to begin to tell you. For I've grown up with the facts of the case, as you may call it, though it's only of late that they've been in any way out of the common. For the going down of an old family is no new nor uncommon thing, worse luck, though it's a sad one to see when it comes to pass; and the Silvester family has been old and gentle these hundreds of years, as the church monuments and parish books do testify, and it owned most of the country 'twixt here and Budhampton. But Mr. Silvester's father, getting rid of his money, by horses, and dice, and the like, sent half his land after it, together with his house out there by Budhampton, which was lost to Lord Budhampton at cards. He pulled it

down to improve it, and died before he could build it up again, and his heir has never built it at all. So the house has gone, and there's nothing to show where it stood. When they left it, the Silvesters came to live up at what they called the Monks' Farm, beside the old tumble-down church—a different place, indeed, judging by what my mother used to tell me of Budhampton House in her day! And it's at the Monks' Farm that they're living now."

"But why do you call it Sacrilege Farm?" I ventured to ask. For the name, which I had heard several times, struck me as uncomfortable.

"Well, it's the name it's had among the people," was Mrs. Janaway's explanation, "whether deserved or not in former days I'm sure I can't say; but the Silvesters I have known have done their best to earn it! You see, the place used to be an old abbey, or monastery, or something, in the days when the Pope of Rome was worshiped in England. But when Martin Luther came and got the better of him, and Queen Elizabeth gave us the Bible, why the Pope had to go back to Rome faster than he'd come, and the monks and the mass after him. So the little church over there, which had been their chapel, was cleaned out and used for Christian worship. And the monk's house was turned into a gentleman's farm,

the two being part of the Silvesters' property. And I've heard that they kept a clergyman of their own there, to conduct the service. But by the time that the family came to live up by it, they'd become little better than heathens, and would have been puzzled to know what to do with a parson. Moreover they took the fittings out of the church, and the wood-carvings, for their own use, or to sell and gamble with, so it's all gutted. It's long since I passed by it, but, as a girl, I've heard the sheep, in stormy weather, crying out from it. And some will tell you that wilder beasts than sheep have harbored there, for after all they are innocent creatures, and no worse than they know how to be. But Cornelius—that's Mr. Silvester—in his youth, with his brothers, and the bad company they kept, have held their revels round the very Table, doing things which I should tremble to tell of. And so the place might have got its name then if it hadn't done so before."

"Well?" I asked, as breathless as herself, when she paused.

"Well, when the parents of Cornelius died, their family scattered, and for a while he, who was the eldest, remained here with a young sister, and the best that's been said of him is that he spoiled her. But it seems that at that time he was making an effort to steady, and to turn his

mind to the farming. But it was little that he knew about it, and those under him found it easy to deceive and cheat him, so that he lost more than he made by it. In this way his money melted first, and then his land, till now he and Jethro, with their man, can work the whole of what is left. Not but what the place would do better, perhaps, with more hands upon it, but their pride makes the Silvesters so close of themselves that they can't bear to let strange eyes look upon their poverty and worse. For the same reason, I suppose, Cornelius gave up the wild companions who had helped him to spend his money, before they could give him up for the lack of it, and became a regular hermit. He hasn't given up the drink, but he drinks alone now, which they do say is more dangerous to a man's body and his soul."

"But he married?" I said.

"Yes, and a decent young woman she was, from Woodstock way. She was beneath him in birth, though respectably connected, and content, as far as could be seen, to live the life of a servant without hire, never being met beyond the dairy or the poultry-yard. But he didn't have her long, for she died when their boy was but four years old, and Jethro was two. Jethro was the child of the sister I told you of, who wouldn't bide at home when her sister-in-law came to it. We never

saw her after, but it was mentioned that she'd married her cousin in a far county, and later, that the small-pox had carried both of them off. After the fashion of the Silvesters they don't seem to have left much goods behind them, for I never heard of Jethro having aught of his own. His aunt was a kind nurse to him while she lived, and he's remained here ever since, as much of a son to the old man as Ambrose ever was.

"Well, when Mrs. Silvester died, Cornelius scrambled these two lads up somehow. At one time he got tutors for them, for he never let them away to school. But he and the tutors seldom seemed long of accord, for a meek man would be shocked by his ways, and one who wasn't meek would hardly put up with his overbearingness. Or young Ambrose, who was big, and masterful, and awful wild, would take his fists to them if they happened to displease him. So one thing or another drove these poor gentlemen away, and, when several had come and gone, Cornelius seemed tired of trying any more, and the boys did without.

"Ambrose grew up like what his father had been, and wasn't to hold nor to bind. They say it was terrible the way he and the old man would wrangle and fight together, especially when the drink was in them. Jethro was quieter, and never

so strong, though always a tall one for his age. I don't know what character he has, except that his pride doubles that of the other two put together. Some say that he's sly, and so would manage to get the better of his cousin, for all Ambrose's bullying. And some tell me that he's just not quite all there. Certainly he hasn't the tongue, nor the ways of the other lad, who was free enough to as many as would knuckle down to him. And what should this Ambrose do one fine day, last year, and altogether unexpected, but bring home a young wife to the farm!

"Nobody knew anything about her at the time, and nobody has been encouraged to ask since. But I've heard that Cornelius fell into a black rage when she came, and wouldn't let her over the doorstone till Ambrose had fought and beaten him—and there was a home-coming for a bride!

"And presently it leaked out about her that she'd been but a boarding-school miss when Ambrose persuaded her to run away with him. For he had the handsomest face, and the wickedest, of any man I've seen. And it's not the worst girls who seem to be attracted by the one thing as well as by the other.

"Anyhow, there she bides to-day in Ambrose's home, for all she was grudged an entrance to it; not having another, for her own people have cast

her out, and won't forgive her for going off with him.

"The quarrels between the men grew worse after the marriage, Cornelius and his son drinking themselves mad. And though Jethro didn't drink, he sulked and brooded, which made him even worse to cross, and he and Ambrose had been cat and dog since babyhood. So it was no healthy house to live in, as you may believe, and that poor girl had time to repent her bad bargain, even in the few months of her married life, before her husband—died."

She looked hard at me.

"How?" I whispered, my heart beating fit to choke me.

"Ah, my dear," Mrs. Janaway said, "I should be a wise woman if I could tell you that! They said that he was burned in his bed, in a drunken sleep. And certainly the bed was burned, with a great part of the room, and—and the body. And the coroner's people who saw it said that the death had been *accidental*."

"Then why—?" I began.

"That's where it is!—*why*? Some say because of one thing, and some because of another, while of foul play there is no legal proof at all. But, to my mind, common sense would need no plainer proof than the one which may be seen

by any who will take the trouble to look for it, in the face of poor Mrs. Silvester herself.

“And then, see the way they keep her mewed up in the house, as if it were a prison where she is the prisoner, and I shouldn’t wonder if you were intended to be the jailer! Why should this be done, if they are not *afraid of what she knows?* It was a queer thing, too, the way their last servant-girl, Betty Castle, disappeared.”

“Oh!” I cried, “what do you mean?” For now I began to be afraid for my silly self.

“Betty was living there just before it happened,” Mrs. Janaway told me. “A flaunting, brazen thing, whose looks were a disgrace. We’d heard talk about her and Ambrose once, and they asked her questions at the inquest which she lied to answer. But her lies didn’t fit to one another, for she was stupid, with all her pertness, and so she was shown up and well shamed.

“But about Ambrose’s death they got nothing out of her, for the reason that there was nothing to get, she having been at her own home that night, as was sworn to by the Silvesters, and others who had come across her down in Ryeworth. She never returned to the farm, however, and some say that, having lost her character, she has fled from the country. Her own mother vows that she

doesn't know now where she may be. And a good riddance, say I!

"Still, I've wondered how such a fine, delicate-looking lady as Mrs. Silvester has been able to get on, with never a one to wait upon her. But they keep her so close that no one may judge by seeing. And if Cornelius and Jethro were hard to come near before, they're ten times harder now, while their man, John Pounce, was always as surly as a dog with a stolen bone."

As the horse stopped once more to breathe, Mrs. Janaway, stopping too, leaned upon the shaft and looked at me, but I could not return her glance. For it had been like an uncomfortable weight upon my mind all the time that she had talked, that I had no business to be giving ear. Not that I had been forbidden by Mr. Silvester to listen if another body should chatter, and the things which were told were surely strange enough to warrant my doing so. Still, above my horror at what I had heard, was an unreasoning sort of disgust against myself for having heard it, and I wished that I knew nothing, though all the time I was longing to know more, and felt almost angry with Mrs. Janaway, both for having told me so much and for having told me so little.

She must have read something of my trouble in the eyes which couldn't meet hers, for her good-

natured, gossipy manner changed of a sudden to a stiff one, and her look became hard.

"Now," she said, "you've known this before!"

"No, indeed, ma'am!" I cried, not stopping to ask myself where the crime would have been, supposing I had. "I never saw nor heard of the Silvesters till yesterday, when Mr. Silvester hired me at the fair."

But her suspicions were not to be so easily quieted. "Ah!" she said, "no doubt I've been but a good-natured fool to have warned you. And I sha'n't wonder if now you run to Mr. Silvester and tell him all that I've said. For girls like you always love gossip, which I never could abide!"

"Oh, ma'am," I replied very earnestly, "I should be afraid to speak a word at all to Mr. Silvester!" And at that she laughed, as though she couldn't help it.

"That sounded like truth, at any rate! Not that I should trouble if you did, mind, for I never spoke the word yet that I should be ashamed to stand by. But it would be a bad part for you to take, to make mischief between neighbors, when all that I intended, after all, was to put you on your guard. Go on, Chestnut! But what beats me is why ever your mother let you take such a place!"

"I have no mother!" I burst out then, almost

sobbing. For by this time I was frightened nearly to death, as well as weary, and in great need of my dinner.

At that Mrs. Janaway looked a good deal softened.

"Well, there, my dear! I daresay it will all come right enough, if you do your duty, as I hope you will. I wouldn't take on a moment if I was you. For, after all, you never knew Ambrose Silvester, did you? So what is it to you if he didn't die in his bed? And perhaps he did, as the coroner said. I can't help the thoughts that come into my own head, for you see I did know him, and, with all his faults, he had an eye, and a smile! But, there! You needn't think of all that, for it doesn't concern you."

I don't know how much longer she would have run on, nor how long I should have had patience to listen to her. But just then we came to a gate, standing open upon a cart-track that led from it, across fields, to a clump of trees about a house and a rick-yard. And in at the gate turned Chestnut, without waiting for a bidding.

"Woa, Chestnut!" Mrs. Janaway exclaimed. "Take your bundle, my dear, and shut the gate after us, for this is our place. And now you must follow the road to the top of the hill, and along the ridge, turning to your right, till you see a gate

on your left, with a cart-road from it thro
the furze by a tump of larch trees. And yo
down where it leads you, to the old church I
you of, with the house to one side of it.
that'll be Silvester's."

I thanked her, fastening the gate behind
as she bade me, while she climbed into the
and bumped away in it across the fields. And
I turned again, to follow the red road up
hill.

CHAPTER IV

SACRILEGE FARM

It was in the autumn which followed our marriage, and upon just such an October afternoon as that on which Margaret had first trodden the road that led to her new home, when my husband and I, for old sake's sake, went there together, a pair of strangers upon the land which his fathers had owned.

The railway, new since Margaret's day, had brought us to Ryeworth, whence we passed, like her on foot, by the Red Hill—that bar of brick-colored earth which here traverses the whity-brown of the rest of the country—and so gained the sandy ridge which tops it.

On either hand the hedgerows were gay with shining berries. The brambles flamed, crimson and purple, and the monster elms bordering the fields rained gold with every puff of the breeze. Beneath us, when we turned to look, Ryeworth nestled, homely and brown, with its sturdy church tower, thatched cottages, and steep barn-roofs,

mellowed and enriched with mosses, orange, ruddy, and green.

And there was "Janaway's," half-hidden by the trees where rooks were settling. I had marked on our way the gate through which Chestnut and his mistress had entered when they had left my poor Margaret standing, confounded, in the red ruts of the solitary, grass-grown road. And as I saw and recognized these things, I became aware how well she had described them.

Out beyond lay an enchanted country, veiled in magic blue, where here and there a phantom tower or steeple, or a dim, tree-crowned summit, half seen through shining vapors, led one to conjecture of an elfin city, or the mysterious boundary of a land of dreams. But closer at hand, where now lay our path, the trees grew thick, and the fields dropped to the valley between russet woodlands, where the report of guns, suddenly bursting through the silence, sent the startled blackbirds shrieking down the hedges near us, while the rabbits in the fern raised scared, whiskered faces to listen.

And here was the gate, with the cart-road through the furze, by a knot of yellowing larches, to the hollow where a tiny, square-towered church stood close beside a stately, gabled farm-house, frosted with gold and silver lichens.

Yews and poplars grew about the church, darkening the windows and choking the green gutters with a refuse of dropped twigs and leaves. Rank grass and weeds obscured the names upon the stones in the strip of churchyard. All was even more forlorn than Margaret's description of it. But entrance to the chapel, whether to sheltering flocks, or to human passers by, was now denied, for chain and padlock guarded the moldering, iron-bound door.

It was through one of the windows, holding by the ivy-ropes which hung across it and swayed in the breeze, that we strove to become acquainted with the inner aspect of the building. But little was to be distinguished through the grimed panes, save only a dim, greenish light, like that which filters to the diver through waves rolling betwixt him and the sun. There I seemed to myself to be gazing through deep waters into an age long since lost beneath the drowning years. And horror seized me, lest out of the depths of them I should see a ghastly shape arise, like a brooding monster of the deep, loathsome and cruel, or perhaps some dreary pale soul whelmed in the awful tide.

"Come away," I breathed; and, dropping back, made haste to draw my companion from the spot that seemed to me to be haunted by that

most gruesome of spectres—the memory of a lost sanctity.

The farm in the north-fronting hollow stood, like the church, in cold shadow. But further afield was sunshine that gilded the pastures outside the old garden wall, standing, as Margaret had often told of it, a remnant of feudal days, massive and turreted, the loopholes of more than one quaint embrasure hidden now beneath a billowy, green curtain of ivy.

With this relic of a troubled time there was, however, testimony that, in the church's more peaceful days, the pleasaunce of the monks had extended to some distance beyond the protection of the wall. For in the field where we stood, cedars still flourished here and there with daintily-growing acacias, and one gigantic tulip-tree stretched its boughs across the narrow garden enclosure, to brush the casements upon that side of the house.

We did not more nearly approach the building, and I was grateful because none came out of it to question our presence. For strangers now inhabited it whom it would have been hard to face with an explanation of our interest in an already forgotten tragedy. But we looked for the windows of the rooms which we knew—the kitchen where Margaret had been busy with house-

hold cares, and where to-day we could see the gleam of firelight behind the panes. The dark-paneled parlor, where Mr. Silvester had sat out the long evenings in gloomy half-consciousness, and Jethro had dreamed over his books. The two rooms above, apportioned to Mrs. Silvester, with their lattices opening into the green shades of the tulip-tree; Margaret's own little casement, and Jethro's; the chamber on the ground floor next the parlor, where Mr. Silvester had slept; and above it the one which, in Margaret's day, had been suffered to remain dismantled and forlorn, where the fire had broken out and Ambrose Silvester had died. We might name them every one, even to the loft above the cowsheds, which had been the shelter of John Pounce the farm-servant.

As we turned from their neighborhood, a heron cried in the trees across the pastures, and with eyes attracted by the sound, we looked, and saw a pale gleam of water there behind the branches. That was the fish-pond of the old ecclesiastics, where the great carp had fattened peacefully among the tree-roots, till the exigencies of a fast-day should call them forth from their muddy seclusion. That was the mimic lake where last-century Silvesters had sailed or pulled the oar in the pretty toy-boats, whence fair hands had crumbled bread for the white-breasted swans that

followed them. That was the grave where a secret lay buried, that may never be uncovered nor known until the judgment-day.

My husband and I looked into one another's eyes.

"God forgive her!" I prayed.

"God forgive *us*," he answered, with set lips. And I slipped my hand into his, saying "Amen."

But we looked no more upon the silent, shining water, nor upon the silent, shadowy house, as we set our faces back to the hill, and climbed it, higher and higher into the sunshine.

CHAPTER V

MARGARET'S MISTRESS

WHEN Margaret, coming down the furze-covered upland that hangs above the hollow, paused there to view the walls and roof-tree of the home which held for her she knew not what of trial or content, she has often told me how she started at the sudden, unexpected apparition of a man who leaped the stile in the hedge beside the way, and stood there, in her path, to confront her.

"I am Jethro Silvester," he announced.

And Margaret, with knees that still trembled a little, dropped her curtsey.

When she managed to look at him, she saw that Jethro Silvester was tall, but that he had something of his uncle's stoop, although he was young—how young she was surprised to observe. For his face was smooth as a girl's, while many a girl might have envied him the clearness and delicacy of his complexion. His blue eyes could be soft, or keen, as Margaret was to know. Just now they seemed as though they could, and would, have cut through her body, to look at the

soul inside. His eyebrows were black, like his hair, which was straight and thick. He was clad, like a laborer, in fustian, with leathern gaiters on his legs, and, while choosing his words with something of the precision of a scholar, his speech had in it a country tang, which had not been noticeable in that of his uncle.

"I suppose that you are Margaret Donne?" he went on. And Margaret curtseyed again.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Silvester sent me to meet you, that I might give you one or two necessary directions, for which there were neither time nor place in the fair."

As she looked at him expectantly, he continued in the even tones of one issuing the simplest of orders, while nevertheless the tell-tale blood surging in his face showed that he was aware that his words might strike her as at least unusual in the circumstances:

"You must always know where your mistress is, and what she is doing. She must not walk alone, nor speak with strangers, for she is not strong, and should therefore avoid anything that might excite her. Sometimes she is a little wild in manner, and then you need not attend too closely to what she says, for very likely she will talk nonsense, merely to startle you. Discourage her from this, but don't let it disturb you.

And, above everything, do not repeat outside anything of this nature which you may hear from her, for gossip is a thing which Mr. Silvester will not brook, and would find it most difficult to forgive."

He broke off from his speech, which sounded as though it had been carefully prepared, to exclaim in more natural tones, while he regarded her, half in pity, half in discontent:

"But what a child it is!"

Margaret, uncertain whether the remark had been addressed to her or not, thought it discreet to let it pass unanswered, and her silence seemed to please him.

"Well," he added, with a sudden smile, "will you be an obedient child? Will you do as you're bid?"

"I will, sir," answered Margaret. And I, who know just how her steady brown eyes must have looked as she said it, am not surprised, as she was, that he appeared satisfied.

He led her to the house, through the yard where the cows were trooping to their stalls for the milking. A man with a dull, wrinkled face was in charge of them, and to him Jethro spoke, making some sort of an introduction.

"John Pounce, here is Mrs. Silvester's maid, Margaret."

For answer, John Pounce grunted, and, with-

out lifting his heavy eyes to Margaret's face, struck the nearest cow with his open hand upon the flank, and, growling to his patch-eyed dog to stay without, followed after her into the milking-shed.

Jethro brought Margaret into the kitchen.

"You will do what you can here and about the house," he said. "But remember that your chief duty is to attend upon Mrs. Silvester. For the rest, we manage the cooking and things as we can, and give no thought to luxuries which we don't want."

Margaret wondered whether cleanliness were in this house regarded as a luxury. And he, noticing her roving eye, added, half apologetically, "We have been busy out of doors of late, and you may therefore find things in a little confusion within. Now I'll take you to your mistress."

She followed him upstairs with a beating heart. For, from his strange directions to her, as well as from his description of Mrs. Silvester, she began to entertain some fear lest grief and terror might have conspired to turn the poor lady's brain, and she scarcely relished the task which was apparently being thrust upon her, of acting as her keeper. So, when Jethro paused before a door in the passage above, on which he knocked, she had to struggle with the impulse that possessed

her, to turn and flee before his summons could be answered. Neither was her uneasiness allayed when a fresh, young voice behind the door burst unexpectedly into singing:

Oh, booby, booby, booby boy,
With legs so long and looks so coy!
What is your pleasure, I pray, with me?
Te dum, te dum, te dum, te dee!

And what is this that I see you bring?
Oh, what is the name of this wonderful thing,
Which I guess is a scarecrow, and hasten to say
That I have no use for it—take it away!

Margaret, looking in astonishment at Jethro, saw that his face was red, and that his blue eyes scowled. Yet, undaunted, he hammered still upon the door, and, “Mrs. Silvester!” he cried sternly.

“Mrs. Silvester isn’t at home!” mocked the voice. Notwithstanding which, the door in the same instant flew open, and Mrs. Silvester stood revealed.

It was long before Margaret got over the surprise of that first encounter with her mistress. For, whatever she had imagined her, it had surely been nothing in the least like this!

Mrs. Silvester must have been still in her teens. Her face indeed was that of a child, so round was it, and so fair, with the dimples flitting about the corners of the rosy mouth, and the eyes narrowed

by an innocent malice. Yet even in the moment when Margaret marked these facts, and wondered at them, a cold hand seemed to grip her heart, as all at once she understood what Mrs. Janaway had meant when she had told her that the chief proof of a tragedy at the farm was to be found in the face of the bride-widow there. For those bright eyes held, as well as laughter, an abiding *fear*, of which their present mirth seemed a most pitiful defiance.

And, while she looked, Margaret comprehended another thing. Namely, the reason which had compelled her masters, however unwillingly, to open their doors to a stranger, in order that Mrs. Silvester might not be without the companionship of another woman in the time when she would most need it. But it never struck her as strange that they had chosen to set between themselves and the responsibilities which they felt themselves unable to face, a child, as Jethro had truly called her, a girl of seventeen, ignorant of nearly the whole of the circumstances of life. For, as soon as she had divined it, her heart had rushed to meet the need of the other. And she knew that henceforth her own happiness would lie in the serving and succoring of her, with the whole strength of her loyal soul and body.

So the two girls stood, regarding one another,

one in mockery, the other with a kind of awe, till Jethro said to his cousin:

"I have brought you the maid engaged for you by my uncle, as he told you."

For answer, Mrs. Silvester looked more closely at Margaret, up and down. Then she looked at Jethro's immovable countenance, comically raising her brows. After which, running back into the room, she cast herself upon a chair, while she broke into peal upon peal of ringing laughter.

"My maid!" she exclaimed between them. "Oh, Jethro, I had no idea that your uncle was such a joker!"

At this Jethro frowned more heavily than before, while he threw a glance, which he could not help being an anxious one, at Margaret. But what he saw in her face appeared to reassure him, for he began immediately to back away, saying as he did so, with a manifest effort to preserve his dignity in face of his cousin's unmannerly levity, by seeming to ignore it:

"I will leave you then with Mrs. Silvester, Margaret. And she will be able to tell you what you can do for her."

With which words he gained the stairs, and hastily disappeared down them, his footsteps sounding jubilantly, Margaret thought, as they bore him from the scene of his discomfiture.

When he had gone, Mrs. Silvester sat up, wiped her twinkling eyes, and looked again at Margaret, who, holding her bundle before her, was still standing meekly in the doorway.

"Well, my maid!" she said, her voice still trembling. "Now that I have you, I wonder what on earth I am to do with you!"

Margaret, glancing at a little clock upon the chimney-piece, and actuated by some inward prompting, suggested that she might make her mistress a cup of tea.

Mrs. Silvester clapped her hands.

"Bravo! I see that you are a creature of ideas. Yes, you shall get me some tea, and I will see whether I remember how to eat and drink; it has been too much trouble of late. But first come to your room. I believe that it is here, beside mine. Mr. Silvester did tell me, but I wasn't choosing to listen to him at the time. Come and see!"

She flung open a door, and stood upon the threshold, nodding her head.

"Yes, this must be your room—don't you think so? Because it is so poky, you see, and so very badly furnished. The bed isn't made yet, but here are the bedclothes—and this sheet is quite ragged—look!" She held it up to her face, and blinked her eyes at Margaret through a hole in it.

"Can you make beds? So can I! I make

my own quite well. But you shall do it for me now, because a lady with a—ahem!—*maid* doesn't make a bed for herself, does she?

"However, there's no hurry about bedmaking now, is there? You were going to make tea, and teatime comes before bedtime. Put down that blue thing. Is it a plum-pudding? What made you bring a blue plum-pudding with you? That's right. I see that you are taking off your bonnet—and how thick your hair is! But it's an unfashionable color. So is mine. Everybody is flaxen nowadays. We ought to be flaxen. Aren't you glad that we are not?"

All the time that she thus prattled, she was watching Margaret narrowly, and it was evident that she only talked to hide her want of ease. Margaret, however, who has a wonderful way with shy children, wild animals, and all creatures that are rendered distrustful or savage through timidity, had the satisfaction, before the end of the evening, of seeing all suspicion of herself die out of the eyes of the other. But the fear in them remained. For that never died.

She went down now into the empty kitchen to blow the fire, and try to get the things together for tea. And thither she was presently followed by Mrs. Silvester, with a finger on her lip.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Can you find any-

thing? I don't know if anybody washed up the breakfast cups. I didn't, though sometimes I do. Let me think, now—where is the tea? Try that cupboard. And don't forget the sugar. Oh, joy, here's a new loaf! Don't you love new bread? What are you looking for? Milk? I believe that I saw a cow somewhere."

She stuffed a tiny handkerchief into her mouth, and retreated giggling to the stairs, whence she immediately returned on tip-toe.

"Isn't it fun? Like our feasts at school, when the cheese was toasted over a candle. We saved it from our suppers. It was horrid at supper, but delicious toasted on hairpins by the light of a secret lantern, after we were supposed to be asleep. Have you got any butter? Be careful, won't you? I have a dread of sheep-ointment, for you never know on a farm. Well then, come upstairs, and we'll make hot buttered toast."

When Margaret, with the tea-tray, had followed her to her sitting-room, an altercation was not long in breaking out between them on the respective merits of stale and new bread as material for toast; Margaret holding a prejudice in favor of the former, and Mrs. Silvester as positively asserting that, as new bread was nice, and toast was nice, toast made from new bread must necessarily be nicest of all.

So peremptory did she become on this subject, that Margaret was obliged at last to give in to her, cutting her slices from the fresh loaf, with the result that the toast "wouldn't do itself," as her mistress expressed it. And Mrs. Silvester, waxing impatient after abusing the fire and the toasting-fork and, above all, Margaret's methods as toaster, finally ate the bread as it was, and pronounced it delicious.

She made Margaret share her meal, as she averred that to eat and drink by herself would be impossible. And in this her little maid must have been only too glad to obey her. When they had finished, Mrs. Silvester observed oracularly:

"That is the first food I have tasted for several weeks!"

Margaret looked startled.

"I don't eat downstairs with the men," her mistress then explained. "When you see them at supper you will not need to ask the reason. I suppose that you will sup with us? John Pounce does. Have you seen John Pounce? Do you think that he is *real*? My own belief is that he's a dummy which was wound up about fifty years ago, and is beginning to run down now, and the speaking part has run down already. Now get me a light, and then go away with the tea-things, for I want to be busy."

CHAPTER VI

A FIRST NIGHT

SUPPER does not seem to have been an enlivening function at Sacrilege Farm.

"I had washed up the tea-things, and was trying to get some sort of order into the kitchen," Margaret told me, "when Jethro came in there, looking rather cross when he saw how I was employed."

"I hope that you're not going to be fussy," he remarked. "We've done very well here without any fiddle-faddling."

"Very well, sir," I made answer, as meek as could be, but determined all the time in my own mind that their things should at least be clean, if I could make them so. "I'm only just finding my way about, and when I've done that I shall be able to go on so that you'd never know I was in the house."

He seemed more satisfied at that.

"I was coming in to see about supper," he said. "We have it in the parlor, and you can come in and set it there."

He showed me what there was, and I laid it on the parlor table, as he directed me, setting places for him, with his uncle, and Mrs. Silvester at the one end, and for myself and John Pounce at the other. But I thought at the time that it was strange to be doing such things at the bidding of a man, and that my mistress would have seemed less out of place as housekeeper. And I remembered afterward how careful he had been to instruct me in various little things, to do them as he said Mrs. Silvester liked to have them done.

I never knew people eat so little as these, nor any who spoke so little while they ate. Certainly, at home we were no great talkers, and there was seldom enough upon the table there to encourage us to be great eaters either. But, for all that, our meals were feasts compared to those of the Silvesters.

Mr. Silvester, who had tramped in, with a scowl in answer to my curtsy, helped us without a word, and munched in silence, glancing now and again at his daughter-law in a way that made it easy to see how little love was lost between the two. For Mrs. Silvester, though she never returned his look, nor glanced indeed in his direction at all, sat with her pale face primmed, and her lip curling, so that I could scarce believe that

here was the same laughing girl who had frolicked with me over the toasting of the bread.

She was eating next to nothing, but pinching her crumbs, and tapping her foot under the table, with now and then a look at me, the meaning of which it was hard to guess. Till, all at once, she set to work to make faces at me, to make me laugh, like the child she was—and an unmannerly one too! But, though her faces were funny enough, I scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry at them, not knowing what to make of such behavior, while all the time the recollection of Mrs. Janaway's story lay so heavily upon my mind.

And there was John Pounce beside me, with no word to say more than the others. But I must admit that, unlike them, he seemed to relish his victuals pretty well. And my mistress, with head on one side, let her eyes rest on him much as she might have considered some strange beast, whose ugliness couldn't be called its own fault.

As for Jethro, after a shy-sour look round, when he took his seat, he seemed to forget all about the rest of us, while he fell into a kind of dream, staring into the darkness outside the window, where no curtain was drawn.

Under these circumstances, though supper didn't last long, I was glad when it came to an

end, and first my mistress slipped away, and then John Pounce stumped out in his hob-nails.

I asked Jethro whether I should clear away? At which he gave a start, as though I had touched him in his sleep.

"Oh, I suppose so," he answered impatiently, when he understood what I wanted, and turned his back on me, while he lit his pipe at the fire.

I felt the old man's eye upon me as I went about the table, lifting the plates and dishes from it, so that it was a mercy that, in my nervousness, I let none of them fall.

"Well!" he said at last, and the sound of his deep voice upon a sudden made me jump. "And what does Mrs. Silvester say to you?"

I thought of what Mrs. Silvester had been saying—of all the girlish nonsense which she had talked since I had entered the house, and, staring back, fascinated, into his fierce, questioning eyes, I was unable to answer him a word.

Jethro turned round from the fire, making, as I thought, some sort of signal to his uncle, who, however, took no heed of it.

"Been chattering already, eh?" he asked me, more savage as he noticed my confusion. And his manner made me guess that he had been drinking before supper.

Jethro spoke before I could reply.

"I have told Margaret all that we agreed upon. And she knows that chattering is not allowed here."

"And she'd *better* know it!" thundered the terrible old man, glaring at me while he seemed trying to work himself into a passion. "Do you know, girl, what we do to chatterboxes?"

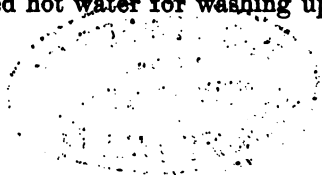
"Hold your tongue!" growled Jethro uneasily. But the other only cast a furious glance at him, and went on:

"Ask your mistress! She's mum enough before us, isn't she? That's because *she* knows. Ask her!"

"Go into the kitchen, Margaret," commanded Jethro. And as I went, glad enough to obey, he turned upon his uncle: "*You* to talk about chattering——!"

I waited for no more, but even after I was in the kitchen, with the door shut, I heard their angry voices raised in the parlor, till presently Jethro flung out of it.

John Pounce was puffing at his pipe before the kitchen fire when I came in, and he cast upon me the first glance I'd had from him yet, which wasn't a sweet one. Moreover, he managed to straddle himself all across, in front of the grate, so that it was a job for me to lift the kettle from it, when I needed hot water for washing up.



However, he said nothing to me, and I was saying just as little to him, when Jethro entered, as I was reaching for the kettle, and straining myself to lift it from the fire without spilling it over the man's leg.

Jethro walked up, and kicked the legs aside, as though they'd been two billets of wood.

"Ever heard of a dog in a manger, John?" he asked, in the good-tempered tone which I was to find was the one that he habitually used to the old farm-servant.

The latter returned him no answer. Neither did he seem to expect any. But Mr. Pounce's legs were after that kept to himself.

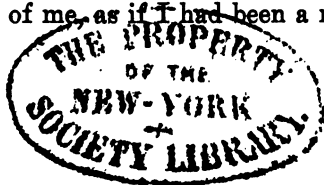
Jethro was carrying a book with him, and he sat down by the hearth to read it. But, while I worked behind him, I saw all the time something that fidgeted me so much that, when I had put away the last clean plate, I had to make bold to speak.

"If you please, sir!"

It wanted more than this to rouse Jethro, deep in his reading, so I came close to him, not marking how; as I did so, I stood between him and the light.

"If you please, Mr. Jethro!"

He looked up, frowning, and waving his hand to get rid of me, as if I had been a moth.



I was sorry then that I had ventured. But I judged that, having begun to speak, I had better finish while I was about it.

“Please, sir, could you give me your coat?”

If ever a man looked astonished, it was Jethro then! And I hastened to explain.

“The seam is split the whole length of the shoulder. But I could mend it in five minutes if——”

He stamped his foot. “Get away, and don’t worry me!”

There was nothing for me but to obey. But in five minutes he looked up again, frowning worse than ever.

“And never speak to me again when I am reading!”

“No, sir,” I whispered, now thoroughly repenting that I had spoken at all, and taking good care to be stiller than a mouse from that minute.

But it seemed that I had disturbed Jethro’s thoughts, so that he could fix them no more upon his book. And first I saw his hand steal up to his shoulder. Then he screwed his head round, trying to get a look at it. And then it was with his other hand that he tried to feel it. Lastly, of a sudden down went his book and off came the coat, which he flung to me across the room with-

out a word. But his face was red when he bent it again to his reading.

I caught the garment, and made the best use I could of my time with it. But while I sewed I saw a rent in his shirt too, and it went to my heart to think how ill that poor lad had been cared for—and he a gentleman born!

But all at once, while we sat quiet, we were startled by the voice of my mistress at the door. And it sounded very cool and precise.

“When you have no more employment to give to *my maid*, Jethro, I have no doubt that I shall be able to find some for her.”

Jethro sprang up as if he had been shot, standing there in his torn shirt, a fine figure of a man, but blushing like a school-boy.

I jumped up too, and saw how pale Mrs. Silvester was, though her eyes were dancing with fun and malice.

Jethro snatched his coat back from me so quickly that I had barely time to pluck the needle from it. And, “Go with Mrs. Silvester,” he said.

To her he seemed to address no word that was not necessary. So I followed her upstairs.

“Well!” she said, laughing, when she turned round in her room and saw me behind her there, in expectation of an order. “You needn’t put on that inquiring air, Margaret, for I have nothing at

all to say to you. I only took you away to annoy Jethro."

I laughed too, for she was so like a mischievous child that it was impossible not to treat her as one.

"Then I suppose, ma'am, that now I may go downstairs again?"

But at that her face changed.

"No, no," she cried, "for if I don't want you, I want *some one*. I was lonely. Isn't it awfully lonely here? And it will be worse as the days grow shorter and the nights longer—the nights, Margaret; the dreadful nights that are so long!"

I thought that she grew wild, and so, being anxious to soothe her, I spoke more familiarly than perhaps I should have done.

"Come here, ma'am—close in here, by the fire. The company there is in a fire! See, I will set your chair so, beside it, and one for me on the other side. And we will talk together, shall we?"

She sat where I had placed her chair, and stared at me. She was all of a shake still, and yet already she was mocking me.

"And what shall we talk about, my wise Margaret? Or what have we to talk about here, where nothing is seen from one week's end to another, and nothing is heard but the footsteps of the

ghosts who crawl round the house and tap at the windows the livelong night? I wonder when we shall begin to see them?"

I shivered, for I never relished this kind of talk, and I couldn't help thinking of the gloomy churchyard, and the broken tombs so close to us. But this would never do!

So I made as though I hadn't heard her, while I bustled about, raking with the poker between the bars and sweeping up the hearth.

"And now, ma'am," I said, having finished, "perhaps there is a bit of needlework which you would like me to do?"

The question seemed to make her cross, which surprised me.

"No, there isn't," she snapped. "Why should there be? My clothes are not in rags, like Jethro's, are they?"

As she spoke, her eyes turned uneasily to a cupboard in the paneling of the wall beside the fireplace.

"But," she went on, seeming immediately to forget her annoyance, "you may talk to me, if you like. Talk about anything—only talk! Why don't you begin? I will give you one minute, and then, if you have said nothing, I will go on talking to you—about ghosts!"

Her dimples were all out, as she looked threat-

eningly from me to the clock, seeming so much herself again that I plucked up heart.

And then it was, dearie, that I first began to tell the tales which I've been telling ever since, till the time came for me to tell them to you, so that it sometimes seems to me that my life must have been spent in little else than talking! But the wonder is that Mrs. Silvester should have cared to listen, while I babbled of all the things I knew—and they were few enough, and mean enough!—till at last she gave a great yawn, and stretched her arms.

“ Oh, Margaret, you jewel, how sleepy you've made me! Now, tuck me up in bed quick, before I have time to wake, or to invent any dreams for myself. For I want to sleep, and to sleep, and to sleep, as if I were dead! ”

When I had done as she desired, and had left her, looking more like a baby than ever, her little round head on the pillow, with her hair parted, and braided meekly beside her cheeks, and the bed-clothes drawn close under her chin, I felt very much inclined for my own bed. But it might be scant manners to seek it, I thought, before going once more downstairs, to see whether any duties awaited me there.

Nobody was to be found, however, in the kitchen, where the light was out, and the fire

burned low. So then I knocked at the parlor door, and, none answering, turned the handle timidly, and looked in.

Jethro was there again, I saw, seated with his back to me, his elbows on his knees, and his head between his hands, whether reading, thinking, or sleeping, I was unable to observe. And facing him was his uncle, staring fixedly at nothing in reality, but, as it seemed to me, straight into my eyes, so that, meeting that gaze upon the threshold, I could neither enter the room nor speak, but fled from it as quickly and as far as I might, nor paused until, upon my couch, I had the sheet pulled up safely over my head.

But, luckily for me, I was so tired out by that time, that I had no moment in which to fret, or to fear, before I had fallen into a slumber which never broke until I heard the cocks and hens crying to be let out of the poultry-house, and saw the gray light of dawn in the window, and knew that whatever ghosts might be haunting Sacrilege Farm, I had managed to sleep a night through there, in spite of them.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. SILVESTER

"But *was* Mrs. Silvester mad, Marget?" I inquired, half inclined to believe it from what she had told me of her sayings and doings.

Never a bit, dearie, no more than you or I. Though it wasn't just at the beginning that I could say as much to myself. For she was wild and wilful, besides being driven very near desperate through her misfortunes, and the fear which would not leave her.

Yet she had been made for laughter, and could change her nature as little as the color of her eyes. So she laughed still, in her trouble; and that was worse than tears. But after a little, when she had grown accustomed to me, her fun and laughter, when we were alone together, were easy and natural enough. And they served to do us both good.

When in company with the old man she was pale and proud, although sometimes then the look on her face would be scarce proud so much as sorry and shamed, but for all that stubborn—the look

which pride leaves behind it when it's dead, and not decently buried.

She was less restrained with Jethro, whom she seemed to delight in flouting, and I thought it angered her that, with all her gibes, she could never provoke him to answer her back. For he who spoke little indeed to anybody seemed to find it so hard to speak to her that I have seen him force himself to it, if it was necessary, as a man brings himself to face pain.

He was a strange man, but I couldn't have gibed at him myself any more than one could make game of a maimed creature or an idiot. For, as Mrs. Janaway had hinted, there was something wanting in Jethro, only it was no part of his wits. It was long before I found out what it was, though I had missed it from the first. But at last I knew that it was *hope*. It sounds but a little thing at first, compared to some. But thank God it's a rare one, to meet a man—and a young man—with never a hope in him, great or small, for anything good or bad. I have never seen one beside Jethro, and I never wish to see another.

But to go back to Mrs. Silvester. She was kind to me from the first, though she would sometimes tease me too, till I didn't know if I was upon my head or my heels!—and, seeing how poor and scant my clothing was, she forced some of her

own upon me, though she hadn't as much for herself as many ladies would consider necessary. For she was as giving as a generous child, and no more of a fine lady's care to distinguish between her own *position* and that of those in a humble walk of life.

But there was one point on which we could agree, and where she often put me almost in my place, bearing with her whimsies. And that was that she would go haunting about the old church and the graveyard, on which I should have been pleased to have kept my back always turned. And she seemed to find nothing beside them in my place to interest her.

Of a fine sunshiny morning it was sure to come. "Come now, Peggy! They're waiting to come to talk to them down there, and we must keep them waiting, dear," out of sheer perversity. And nothing that I could say or do at the time would keep her from following her wild and wholesome fancies. But the nonsense which she invented to torment me with in the day would turn back to be her own torment in the windy evenings, till she dared not be left without it, and I had to share her bed.

She would weave wonderful histories of the buried people, from spelling out the words on the crazy tombstones, or the tablets, covered

green mold, upon the church walls. And these she would repeat to me, as wise as one of the learned gentlemen who will dig in a hummock, or beside an old wall, till they can tell you all about some heathen king and his battles—and the less there is to see, the more there seems to be to say about it.

In a corner of the churchyard there were two gravestones, belonging each to a Benjamin Goddard, whom she would have to be one and the same person. For their appearance was almost exactly similar, and we were unable to discover a date upon either, so that there was nothing but common-sense to contradict such an idea. But common-sense was the quality which Mrs. Silvester seemed most content to be without. And the way that she explained it was that Benjamin Goddard had built a second tomb for himself after his death, finding the one which his relatives had provided for him at the time, for some reason unsuitable to his requirements.

"But the question is, Peggy," she would put it to me, very earnest and solemn, "which is which? And which is Benjamin Goddard in now? Or do you think that he goes from one to the other, when he needs change of air, like Dr. and Mrs. Primrose, from the blue bed to the brown?"

"Oh, ma'am, does it matter?" I asked, being only anxious to leave the subject.

"Of course it matters—to Benjamin Goddard! Else why should he have taken the trouble to carve for himself a new headstone, to match the old? Oh, Peggy, shouldn't you have liked to be here at the time he carved it? To have heard mallet and chisel clink upon it all through the night, and in the morning to have discovered a new fat cherub, or grinning death's-head, peeping out of the garland? Do you think that they are portraits, Peggy? Do you think that he carved them from life—or rather from death?"

I would hear no more of this, and crammed my fingers into my ears. And she pulled them out again, so that the argument ended in a romp. For if my behavior was not always what that of a servant should be, my excuse must be that hers was surely unlike that of any mistress whom I have seen before or after.

"And now," I announced, breaking away from her, "I am going to Ellen Silvester for my comfort."

For there were Silvesters buried here, though the greater number of them lay below at Budhampton. And I had often wondered where Ambrose had been laid, but none ever enlightened me, and of course I never asked. But Ellen Sil-

vester's was a grave to which I had taken a fancy among all those ugly winged skulls, and hour-glasses, with verses about

Affliction sore
Long time I bore,

and the rest. For it was marked by a plain stone, bearing her name, Ellen, wife of Cornelius Silvester, esquire, formerly of Budhampton, in the county of Oxon.; together with a date of sixty years ago, and these lines:

Dear husband, now my life is past,
My love to you till death did last.
So now for me no sorrow take,
But love my children for my sake.

"But there was a legacy to leave to a widowed man!" flouted Mrs. Silvester, drumming with her fingers upon the stone, as if virtuous Mrs. Ellen's meekness was little to her taste. "Do you know, Peggy, that this was the mother of the Cornelius Silvester with whom you are acquainted? And do you imagine that it would have been such an easy task to love him, for whatever dead woman's sake?"

I felt that we were approaching dangerous ground, and, in my hurry to be off it, I exclaimed almost at random, and as if I had not heard her, "Why, here is a little grave-mound as neat and sweet as ever a one in our churchyard at home,

which our good rector calls *God's Acre*, and tends like his flower garden! ”

And, sure enough, the grass was carefully cut upon it, though unevenly, as if with some implement too small for the work, and there were no nettles nor burdocks growing near to shelter snails, but the daisies which we call *hen-and-chickens*, flowering for the second time in the year in a little row.

My mistress at my remark turned so red that I had a fear of having stumbled by chance perhaps upon Ambrose's very grave. So, without seeming to think of it again, I turned away. But as soon as I might be there alone, I crept back again. And then I saw that Ambrose could never have been buried there, for the little mound was but a quarter of a man's length. And the stone was so old and moldered that I could make nothing of the name, though somebody had been at pains to scrub away the green growth and dirt from it. Only, I know not how, the verse following the name was still clear enough to be read, and I can repeat it to you now, for it took my fancy so that I often spelt it over:

Poor babe, who woke upon the earth
For one short hour to wail thy birth,
Then turned to everlasting sleep;
Thy lowly bed may angels keep!

So then, guessing that Mrs. Silvester had tended that grave, decking it with daisies, the children's flower, out of pity for a little life soon ended, I was glad. For I had wondered before now what sort of heart she would bear toward her own infant, and such evidence of her gentle feeling toward another's reassured me. But of this I was soon to know more.

I have told you how, upon my first evening, when I had asked my mistress for some sewing to do, she had been vexed, and had glanced in a secret way at the cupboard beside the fireplace in her room, as if some part of the cause of her vexation had been within.

Well, there was always a sort of mystery connected with this cupboard, and, as often as she could remember to do so, Mrs. Silvester would keep it locked. But, being careless and forgetful by nature, she would frequently leave the key in the lock, and, whenever she found it there, she would glance sharply at me, frowning, whether at me or at herself I do not know; but indeed it wasn't I who deserved her frowns, for I never thought to open the cupboard, nor to peep at what she would have kept from me.

Besides this, she would sometimes order me out of the room, saying that she intended to be busy there. But I could never think what she

found to be busy about, for in the whole of the place I could see no books, nor music, nor other lady's occupations, and when she called me back—as she very soon would, for she hated to be long alone—she never seemed to have been doing anything except suck the forefinger of her left hand, which was what I oftenest caught her at.

Well, one day when I had been for near an hour away from her, and was coming back with a cup of gruel—which I made her take between meals, because at them she wouldn't eat enough to keep life in a sparrow—receiving no answer to my knock, I was about to knock again, when my ear was caught by a sound, low but unmistakable, of sobbing in the room.

Now I had never known such a thing happen before, and it brought my heart into my mouth, so that, before I could ask myself whether I was doing right or wrong, my one notion being to get to her, I flung the door open and ran in.

And there she was, sitting in her chair, with a heap of white needlework upon her lap, and her face bowed over it, crying as if her heart would break.

And when I was come to her, and she had looked at me out of her poor swollen eyes, she just up and threw the whole of it in my face! And, "*It won't come right, the nasty old thing!*"

she wailed. "Take it away from me, Peggy, for I hate the sight of it!"

And when I looked, why it was a sort of infant's robe that the poor child had been trying to make, with no more idea how to set about it than the innocent who was to wear it—and indeed it would have been a puzzle to have put it on one!

But at that I burst out crying too, and my arms went round her.

She didn't weep long, however, for that wasn't her way, before she looked up again, half-laughing and blushing, to take me by my two ears, which was a habit she had when she wanted to coax and wheedle me.

"Will you help me, like a good Peg-top?" she whispered. For that was her name for me, too, whenever she was to be specially indulged.

I was pleased and proud to promise it. Not that I knew much more about the business than she did, but I had learned something through helping Mrs. Ussher on occasions, and was besides a pretty fair needlewoman, while I must say for my mistress that she was the worst whom I'd ever seen wear a thimble.

So together we contrived, and I cut out the things, which she certainly sewed with great diligence. And sometimes it seemed to vex her that

I could sew faster than she did, although my stitches were smaller. For she would put on a grand air, as she remarked:

“I am unaccustomed to such plain work, as you may see, my good Peggy. At the boarding-school where I received my education, the young ladies were instructed how to embroider in silks, and with perch-scales. But I fear that I was often idle even over such employments.”

Then, even while I was trying not to laugh at what she told me, the pitifulness of it all struck me into tears, and I must creep close to her.

“My poor dear!” I said. “My poor dear!” But at that she hid her face against my shoulder, to murmur:

“*Poor?* And because of *this?* Why, this is the only thing, Peggy—the only, only thing——!”

The happy days which we spent together after that! Silly, ignorant children that we were, and well, perhaps, for us that we were so. We were like two little girls who sew for their dolls. And while we sewed we gossiped. It was then that for the first time I spoke to another of *Baby-brother*. And Mrs. Silvester in return told me about *Clarissa*, whose eyes were to be blue as forget-me-nots, and her hair the color of the silk that is wound from the cocoon.

I am afraid that at such times each would

become a little jealous of the child which the other bragged about. And then:

“Girls are best!” observed my mistress positively. “And their clothes are ever so much prettier to make. Besides, boys grow into men—like the Silvesters.”

“Some boys don’t!” I cried.

And then we both remembered the boy who would never grow into a man at all.

And so we kissed each other.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW MARGARET BEARDED LIONS

It seemed strange to me when Margaret told thus of the quiet filling of her days in the place which she had entered with such drear misgiving.

"Had you forgotten then," I asked her, "the dark things at which Mrs. Janaway had hinted?"

But this she denied.

"Indeed, my dear, the recollection of them never quite left off haunting me. For if in general I was too busy to be able to think at all, except of my work, and the needs of my mistress—which I verily believe troubled me more than they did her—still there were always those thoughts in the background, ready to jump out and fright me, like bogies, whenever they found me off my guard."

Then, to give myself courage, I would say, "Oh, the foolish gossip! If the gentlemen at the inquest were satisfied, surely Peggy Donne may be so! Why shouldn't Ambrose Silvester have been burned, or smothered in his bed, as they said, when one sees how easily the same thing might

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happen to his father any of these nights? For Ambrose, they say, had his habits."

But for all the wise lecturing which I gave myself, I couldn't be easy when I reflected on Mrs. Silvester's unnatural, scared look, and what might be the meaning of it; though I did my best to find a reasonable cause for it too.

Surely she had had a hard time in her husband's house, seeing and hearing much that must have been altogether strange and shocking to a young lady reared in a fashionable boarding-school, where they had taught her to embroider with perch-scales! And then had followed his sudden death, terrible enough, in all conscience, without the thought of foul play to aid in making it so. And she was in a condition when it isn't easy for a woman to shake off terrors.

But, then, why was she kept the prisoner that Mrs. Janaway had truly described her? And why did her jailers regard her with such black suspicion in their looks, as though they watched for her to do them a hurt? Or what might such a slip do that *could* hurt them?

So, you see, I left off pretty much where I had begun in my thoughts, and got small comfort out of thinking.

From the first I had wondered to see no church-going from the farm, for we had been par-

ticular at Stadwell, and few there but had attended at least once upon a Sunday. But, when I ventured to speak to Mrs. Silvester of it, she only laughed, and yawned.

“Are you so anxious to tramp through the mud to Budhampton or Ryeworth, Peggy, to hear an old man mumble and drone, or another beat upon the cushion, whilst a choir of herd-boys bleats out an *Amen!* as musical as the cry of their own sheep in distress?”

But a Sunday came when she spoke differently.

Through all the Saturday she had been cross and restless, and hard to please, and my belief is that she was being driven desperate by dulness alone, for she wasn't one of those who can be content to be dull; till at last she must be doing something—anything—no matter whether it were bad or good, so that it might bring her ever so little change or distraction.

And so, at supper time, she set to work to get it by teasing Jethro.

So accustomed was I by this time to the usual glum silence of our meals, that it was almost a shock to me to hear her begin to talk.

And first, “Jethro,” she said, to all appearance very amiable, “I do wish that I could induce my hair to grow as fast as yours!”

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For answer, Jethro cast one of his freezing looks upon her. But his color rose too, for certainly his hair was longer and shaggier than gentlemen at that time were used to wear it. And his look didn't freeze her into silence.

"But you don't beat me here!" madam went on, drawing a slender finger round her cheeks and chin.

My master looked at her then, angrily as usual, but with a kind of uneasy astonishment in his anger, as though he found something to fear in this unwonted mood of hers, and what it might lead her to.

Whereupon she drew back, like a child who feels that it has been too bold, putting on a little air of mock penitence.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Silvester! I am afraid that my manners grow rusty through want of use, and that I shall forget my good behavior altogether, before I have occasion for it!"

"You don't forget how to talk!" growled her father-in-law.

"Which shows, sir, how much better my memory is than Jethro's. But who knows how tongue-tied I might have become by this time, if you had not been so thoughtful as to provide me with such a good listener!"

And at that, supper being ended, as she rose

and passed me, leaving the room, she laid her hand for a moment lightly upon my shoulder.

The old man jumped up too, with an oath, as the door closed upon her.

"What does she mean, girl?" he demanded of me. "What has she been saying to you? Speak out now!"

As he approached me threateningly, Jethro set himself between.

"Can't you see?" he said quickly, under his breath. "Couldn't you mark her humor, and that she was but trying to fool us?"

His uncle sneered back.

"She has fooled you, it seems! Would you trust her?"

Jethro looked behind him at me, and at John Pounce, who was stolidly scraping his plate.

"Can't you get along?" he said to us. And the hint was broad enough for even John to take it.

When we had reached the kitchen I had the curiosity to steal a glance at my companion, to try to read in his face what he made of all this. But John's face wasn't formed for reading, any more than the round knob at the end of his stick, and whether it had more thoughts than that same knob at the back of it I can not tell you, for the man was hard to make out.

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One of the only two feelings which I ever surprised in him was a stupid jealousy of myself, from which I reason that he entertained a sort of affection for the Silvesters, and an unwillingness to see any one come betwixt them and himself. He wouldn't have harmed me though, any more than Patch, his dog, would have harmed the kitchen cat, which he seemed to look upon as good meat wasted for want of killing, but wouldn't have hurt a hair of, out of respect to the will of his master, which he could not understand and yet obeyed.

The other feeling which I discovered in John was not manifested so early, nor so easily explained. The first time that I saw sign of it was once when he was churning in the dairy, where I was with him, washing and throwing the butter as it came.

Presently John, after long and fruitless pounding at the third churnful (for in those days we had none of your machinery for making butter by magic), stopped, to throw back his arms, which were aching I have no doubt, while he turned his hot face to the door, to get the breeze upon it.

And there in the doorway, spying my mistress—who had that moment appeared in it, stepping out from the house to ask me for something she wanted—at sight of her his face suddenly became

black, and drawn with passion, while he up and slammed the door in her face.

"John!" I cried, aghast at such rude conduct.
"My goodness, here's manners!"

But at that he turned on me.

"Time to think of manners, isn't it?" he sputtered, "with the butter spoiled and the milk wasted! You little fool, didn't you see her eye upon it, and couldn't you have spoke? Or how long were you going to see me churn, with the butter gone to hell all the time?"

I was so taken aback at hearing all this from a man who in general wouldn't go the length of a *Good-morning*, and thinking of my mistress standing out there in the yard, with the door banged in front of her, that I didn't try to answer him before I hurried out to her with some story of John feeling the draft, and scolding me for having left the door open.

But Mrs. Silvester only laughed, holding up her finger at me.

"S-s-h, Peggy! It doesn't suit you to prevaricate, and I never saw any one do it so badly. And I know why John Pounce banged the door."

If this was so, she knew more than I did, but I was not to learn more just then; for she went on to speak of other things, and by the time that I got back to the dairy there was the man's wooden

face on him again, and no word, good or bad, to be got from him. Neither did I dare to ask him why he had chosen to throw the whole of that third churnful to the pigs.

But afterward I watched him closer when my mistress was by, and I thought that he gave a wriggle, like a toad under the harrow, whenever she came near him. And once, at dinner, when he had cut his stupid thumb, and she was the first of us to see it, while he sat gaping at the blood, and was out with her little handkerchief in a minute to bind it, he let one howl that sounded three parts fear and the rest a curse, and fairly ran from her into the yard, where I found him presently, all of a shake, and holding his hand under the pump.

"I never could abear the sight of blood," he mumbled, when I stared at seeing him so; and I knew that he lied.

Well, as I said, John's face didn't tell me a great deal when he and I were turned into the kitchen, that we mightn't hear our betters quarrel in the parlor. And, after Jethro had quieted the other, I heard him go up to Mrs. Silvester's sitting-room, a thing which he had never done to my knowledge since the day when first I came and he had taken me there to her.

When he had been up for ten minutes or so

her bell rang, and, going to answer it, I heard her say, in a red-hot passion, as I opened the door:

“You not only insult me, but injure yourselves, when you doubt the word which I gave you! For, if you will not accept it, I shall consider that it is given back to me, and then——”

She saw me and broke off with a laugh.

“You there, Peggy? Then set a chair for Mr. Jethro Silvester. For I neglected to do so when he came in, having no idea that he intended to honor me with so long a visit.”

And thereupon, before I could obey her, Jethro, with a black face, marched out, and my mistress, seating herself, began to hum a little tune. But she had to leave off presently because her teeth were chattering.

Seeing this, a great anger took hold upon me, that the poor lamb should be so harried by those who ought to have cherished her. And I caught her to me, crying that they were cowards to treat her as they did.

But she, kissing me, while she held me by the ears, replied:

“Nay, Peggy. Let us be just! They are no cowards, but over-anxious, perhaps, for *the honor of the Silvesters*, which is strange when one considers——”

She did not finish, but began to whimper a

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little. "Yet, Peggy, oh Peggy, I think that Jethro should have trusted me! He might have trusted me, indeed!"

And before I could make any answer to this, she looked up to say how pretty Jethro's color was when he was angry.

I suppose that I appeared astonished at that—for I never could remember not to be so by the sudden changes of her moods—for then she thrust me from her, tossing her head, as she cried:

"Pooh, he has a girl's face! That pink is ridiculous in a man of Jethro's inches!"

But, alas! neither of us guessed then what that pretty pink color in Jethro's face might mean.

Well, so the next day, being still in a contrary humor, my mistress announced her intention of going to church in Budhampton. But, when I presently made report of this to Mr. Silvester, he cursed and swore at my news and me, declaring flatly that Mrs. Silvester should do no such thing.

This put me about considerably, for I had not dreamed of any objection being taken, and sorely grieved I was at having thwarted Mrs. Silvester's plan by betraying it.

And, "Oh, sir," I cried, "I hope that you will let her go; for, indeed, here she is moping to death."

"And a good thing," growled Mr. Silvester

cruelly, "if she could dispose of herself so easily! But unluckily folk don't often die from moping."

"If you say 'yes,'" I pleaded, forgetting half my fear of him in my eagerness, "I will go with her, and see that nobody speaks to her down there, nor she to any."

At that he roared at me.

"And who dares say that nobody is to speak to her, nor she to any? Or what business of yours is it whether they do or not?"

"Indeed, sir," I stammered, "I don't know. But Mr. Jethro said it was to be my business."

"Mr. Jethro is a fool!" he retorted. "Go and tell him that I say so. But, as for Mrs. Silvester, it is my pleasure that she stays at home."

Seeing that this was all that I was likely to get from him, I took his advice and went to his nephew, but not, as you may believe, with his words in my mouth! And by the time that I had found Jethro I was almost in tears at the thought of how I had bungled matters.

"If you please, sir," I began very timidly, for I knew by this time how he hated to be disturbed.

He looked up, with a sigh indeed, but waited patiently for me to continue.

"If you please, Mrs. Silvester is anxious to go to church. But when I said the same to the master, he forbade it."

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“ Well,” said Jethro, “ then you had better tell her so.”

“ But,” I persisted, “ I thought that, perhaps, if you, sir, were to speak to Mr. Silvester——”

“ It is none of my business. Nor of yours, Margaret!” looking straight at me.

I don’t know what there was in this to have rendered me so bold and passionate. But I felt quite hot as I burst out:

“ Is it my business, then, to see my mistress killed, soul as well as body, and say nothing about it? ”

Jethro’s eyebrows twitched together, as they might have done at a troublesome child. But he smiled, a cold, unmerry sort of smile, as he replied:

“ So you think that Mrs. Silvester’s soul is endangered by her being kept from Budhampton Church? ”

“ It’s a fine thing,” I went on storming, “ if she may not so much as say her prayers! ”

“ She is welcome to say them all day long—at home, if she pleases. But be easy, Margaret. It is scarcely to pray, I imagine, that your mistress desires to go to Budhampton.”

“ And I,” said I, for I wanted to know just how we stood, “ am I not to go either? ”

"No," answered Jethro quite coolly, "you are not to go either."

"Then we are *both* prisoners?" I cried, surprised at myself even while I spoke, for I had never withstood stepmother, nor any one, like this. "And how long will it be before you fetch in another, to be jailer to me?"

Jethro looked at me, and his look was angry certainly, but still more strange and troubled, as he said slowly:

"It is too far for Mrs. Silvester to walk. And she requires you to stay with her."

At that, I just gave him his look again, feeling, as I did so, an odd sort of pain that I should have heard him speak what wasn't the truth. And he met my eye steadily at first, but his face grew red, and redder, as a hurt child's face reddens before he bursts out crying; till presently he flung away from me, not, indeed, to cry, but with a groan:

"O God, I'm near sick of it!"

Well, then it was borne in upon me that, if Mrs. Silvester's suffering was great, Jethro's, for some reason which I might not fathom, was greater still, and that I should do well to give over meddling with what I so little understood. In which thought I trusted that there was no disloyalty to my mistress. So I said meekly, "I

will tell Mrs. Silvester, then, that we are to stay at home."

And it would have been well if I had stopped there. But, desiring as I did to make some apology to him for my rudeness just now, I went on, until my words had shown all too plainly the road by which my thoughts had traveled:

"And, oh sir, but I'm sorry I drove you to it!"

And there I pulled myself up short, feeling that now indeed his anger might burst upon me.

But it didn't. For he gave a sad smile, half holding out his hand to me before he plucked it back.

"Thank you, Margaret! And now run away, and in future be less prodigal of your questions, for you know what a saving that makes in lies!"

So, running away, as he told me, I seemed all at once to see everything quite clear—how Mr. Silvester, in a drunken quarrel, had killed his son, for even which fearful act there might have been the excuse of *extenuating circumstances*, as the lawyers call them. And how Jethro was giving up the good of his life to save the miserable old man from the consequences of his crime. And how both of them dreaded the knowledge of it possessed by the dead man's widow, whose promise of silence—extracted God knew how!—they dared not trust, knowing her stormy and variable nature.

Wherefore they would not allow her to mix with strangers, an incautious word to whom might mean ruin.

But, at this point of my musings, the sound of my master's heavy step without caused me to start up of a sudden, scared to sickness and trembling.

For, if I had guessed aright, what was this man, guilty of the blood of his only child?

And, because some thought of self must needs creep in, the idea that I was bound for long months to his service, to dwell beneath his roof, obey his behests, and—worst of all—bear his daily approach and presence, oppressed my soul like the sentence of penal servitude pronounced in the shrinking ears of a vagabond, whose liberty was all that he had had. For that soul of mine, once so free, was clogged now by the doubt which the light of any day might see changed to a certainty. And it was against such a dawn that I prayed with a fervor born of my ignorance of the days which were yet to break in its stead.

CHAPTER IX

THE NEW EPITAPH

I BELIEVE (Margaret went on) that, if they had but let Mrs. Silvester have her will, the desire to go to church at Budhampton would have left her of itself before she got there. But, because I told her that it was forbidden by my master, she flew into a passion with him and Jethro first, and next with me for having given them news of her intention.

And I was sorry enough, as I told her, for the way in which things had fallen out. But, when all was said and done, I was Mr. Silvester's servant while I ate his bread and took his wage, and couldn't go against his orders, unless I broke my bond and paid forfeit for it. And this I told her too.

But she only scolded the more, till at last, saying that she was sick of all of us, and our spying ways, and that she should seek sanctuary from us where she dared us to follow her, she flung off from me, across the garden and the grave-yard, and so into the church, whence she shut me out;

the heavy, iron-clamped door grating over the stone floor as she did so, with a surly sound of denial.

But, indeed, I had small desire to enter after her, until my mistress should call me. For I knew that she was safe inside, if the damp gave her no chill; and I guessed that it would not be for long that she cared to stay there by herself.

So I waited in the garden, to be at hand, grieving sorely that she had quarreled with me, for I loved her by this time, next to father, best of all who lived upon the earth. But she was longer than I expected, after all, and I was beginning to fidget and to ask myself whether I dared seek her in the church, and risk being called a spy again for my pains, when I heard the door grind upon the flags once more, and looked up, to see her face peeping at me through the opening.

She beckoned, and I was glad enough to run to the call of her finger, when,

“Peggy!” she began at once, in some excitement, but with no remnant of anger nor of hurt feeling left in her look or tone, “I have found a new epitaph in the church—look here!”

She led me to the altar-step, where, stooping as she directed, I saw that something had been scribbled with a pencil upon the upright face of it.

"It is the epitaph of this place, and—and of a heart, Peggy," she said, and bade me read it aloud. I remember the words still, which seems strange, seeing that I could make nothing of them at the time. And this is how they ran:

A ruined temple, fearful grown,
The home of devils, haunt of sin;
And where should be the Mercy-seat,
A human sacrifice within!

The guardian, set to keep the gate—
God's Image—lyeth in the dust.
The treasured good is spoiled by thieves,
Devoured of worms, defiled by rust.

The Fool hath searched his heart in vain:
There is no God! we hear him cry.
Alas, poor Fool! thy word is true:
Eat, then, and drink, and after—die.

When I had read it I looked up at her. She was sorely agitated.

"Isn't it terrible?" she asked. "Isn't it terrible and true?"

"No," I answered stupidly, "not true, because there *is* a God."

"What! in the heart of a fool? You are ignorant indeed, Peggy, if you do not know that God is only where He is; and that *where* He is not, there He is *not*."

"Did you write this?" I asked.

"I? No, it was he—Jethro. But he meant me, I know. Me, and this dreadful place where they will bury me."

"Nonsense!" I cried, more sharply than I should ever have thought to speak to her, but her words hurt me. "And, if you didn't, how ever did you come to find it down there in such a place, and in the shadow?"

She blushed. "I was here, upon the step below. I had felt tormented—hunted, and I recollected how sinners once had been used to find sanctuary at altars. So I, too, fled to this one for shelter, and found—*this!*"

She was trembling so as to alarm me. And I felt my anger blaze up once more against Jethro, who might, I thought, have found better employment for his idle moments than the scribbling of such poor blasphemous stuff (for so it seemed to my ignorance), where my lamb might meet and be hurt by it. So,

"If one talks of *fools!*" I cried. But then I saw that it was of no use to scold, for that she was going to faint. And there was only time for me to support her as far as one of the worm-eaten seats before she fell upon it and lost consciousness.

I had to leave her there, in as easy a position as I could manage for her, while I flew to the

house for water. And, hurrying out with it, I very nearly spilled it over Jethro, who was then passing through the doorway on his way in.

Seeing me in such a flurry he stepped back, and was surprised for once into asking me a question.

“What is it, Margaret?”

“You’d best come and see that for yourself, sir!” I answered rudely, as I ran. “You’ve done enough harm without doing more now, making me lose my time when I’m trying to mend it!”

I never thought that he would take me at my word and come. But that is what he did. And when I clattered up the stone floor of the church, with my jug of water in my hand, he was at my heels.

The poor lady was lying still as I had left her, which, though I had expected nothing better, it gave me a dreadful qualm to see. But there was some one there even more disturbed than I was, and I scarcely recognized Jethro’s voice when he asked:

“Margaret, what is this?”

“This is some of your work, Mr. Jethro,” I answered, determined to let him have it. “She saw what you wrote there, and it has made her like this. I can’t think why,” I added spitefully, “for I see no sense at all in it myself.”

His color had gone when he bent over her.

"*I wrote?*" he asked. "But never mind that now—quick! the water!"

And can you think what my feelings were like then, to see myself pushed aside, as of no account, while he, her enemy, the tyrant who had, it seemed, found some new mysterious way to persecute her that was worse than all the rest, was leaning over my own lamb to sprinkle her with water, and fan her face, and chafe her little hands with great ones that were shaking? I could scarce believe it, though I saw it with my eyes, and was bursting with vexation at what I saw.

"Mr. Jethro!" I began, trying for all that to be calm, "will you not stand away, so that Mrs. Silvester's *friend* may come to her?"

But I might as well have ordered off the bust of old Jethro Silvester with the curled wig, that was staring at us, from between a pair of black marble curtains, on the wall above. And then my mistress opened her eyes.

I was terrified for the effect upon her when they should fall upon Jethro. But I need not have been. For all she did was to smile drowsily, like a child waking from a good dream to see the face of its mother as part of the same.

And at that Jethro smiled back at her, as unconsciously. And I caught my breath, because for

the first—for almost the only—time, I was seeing those two as they should have been, and as God had made them before they had unmade themselves.

But it could not last. And it was pitiful to see how, with remembrance, the smile faded first from Jethro's lips, hers on the instant following it away, and how her eyes opened wide with some expectation of trouble.

He beckoned to me to take his place, for he had had his arm supporting her, and now he gently drew it away, so that she might rest upon mine. But she would struggle up to be sitting. And then they both looked helplessly at me, as if neither could find a first word to say.

"Are you better, my dear?" I asked her.

"I am quite well. Have you been making a fuss, Margaret? Did you fetch Mr. Jethro?" And she frowned at me.

I told her no; that he had followed me.

"Then lend me your arm, like a good girl, that I may be able the sooner to leave him in contemplation of his *ruined temple*. Excuse me, Jethro! I trust that this foolish interruption may have done no injury to the inspiration of your genius."

The blood at this rushed over Jethro's face. And I saw by the flash in his eye that now he un-

derstood what had puzzled him in my speech at the door.

"You saw that foolery?" he began. But she stopped him by a hand outstretched.

"Nay, I call it by no such discourteous name. And, indeed, I am inclined to look upon it rather as wisdom, most bitter because most true. Only——"

Her eyes grew piteous in spite of her struggle to be hard, and I saw her hand go quick to her heart, so that I feared that her weakness might return.

It did, but not in the way that I had dreaded, as she stamped her foot, crying, "It was like you, who have never had the courage, or the honesty, to speak your condemnation of me to my face, to find this way to rid yourself of the burden of your feelings! Well, you have hurt me. I am proud, but my pride can't conceal that. You have never forgiven me, at which I can not wonder, but you might have found a nobler method of revenge!"

Jethro's face paled, while his eyes flashed again.

"Good God! You can think that I thought of *you* when I wrote?"

My mistress looked at him as though despising his shiftiness, while she answered slowly, "It

would be strange if I did not, when every line of the portrait is a reproduction of some feature that I know—who better!—in the original.”

“ You are mad to dream it ! ”

He stepped nearer to her. His eyes devoured her face, yet he flung out his hand as though to hold her off, while he demanded roughly, “ What do I know of your heart, that I should presume to speak of what it is, or is not ? ”

“ Whose, then ? ” she asked.

Jethro turned from her, hanging his head, as though he had no reply for her. But even so he murmured, groaning, as though the words were wrung from him, against his will, and with pain:

“ The heart knoweth *its own* bitterness.” And he added, in a lower voice yet, and with more distress, “ And the defilement of itself ! ”

My mistress stood silent. And her silence seemed to draw him, as no speech could have done. For he turned again, reluctantly, and with head held low, while his look traveled all along the ground, to her feet. And there it began to climb, slowly, till it reached her little hands, locked together and trembling, when I saw his lip quiver. But his gaze still mounted, till it came to her face, and met hers, which had never left him.

And long it seemed to me while their eyes spoke together. But what they were saying to

each other I did not dare to guess, till, more gravely than I had ever seen her do anything before, my mistress took the water that was left in the jug, and soaked her handkerchief in it, kneeling down by the altar-step, where she began to wash and rub with all her little might the stone which had the writing on it.

I sprang forward then, telling myself that, if it were a case of *scrubbing*, that, at any rate, was a thing which I understood, and might do for her.

But Jethro was before me, for he knelt at her side.

"Won't you believe me?" he pleaded.

She answered, with a wonderful soft seriousness, that held more sweetness than all the gaiety to which I was accustomed in her:

"Do you think that I should try to wash away your judgment upon me?" And to this she added more softly still, and with a catching breath, "It should be done with my tears, but—I have none left."

At that his face was drawn with a sudden bitterness of trouble, but for a moment he stayed, motionless by her side. And I, watching them kneel together so, with young, bending heads catching the light from the window above the altar, had a thousand mad thoughts whirling through my brain, which in the next instant were

gone, chased away by the recollection of my own voice painfully reading:

And, where should be the Mercy-seat,
A human sacrifice within!

And Jethro had sprung up, to leave her alone, as he strode away from her out of the church.

I went to lift her, for she was nearly spent. And while she leaned upon me she said: "Jethro used to be kind to me, Peggy. And so it was not fitting that I should let that stand."

"Indeed," I blurted out, "it is much better that such lying nonsense should be wiped out!"

She laughed at that, replying more lightly: "Yet, if one were to erase all lying epitaphs——!"

"Oh," I said crossly, for I was full of uneasiness as to the effect which all this might have upon her, "your thought runs too much upon epitaphs and tombs! It is all the fault of this moldy place which Death has held for himself too long. If I had my will, to-morrow not one stone of it should be left upon another!"

This seemed to revive her mightily, so that she was able to laugh at me.

"My pious Peggy a destroyer of churches? Fie! who would have thought it? Come away, then, for indeed I fear to linger any longer beneath this roof in such company!"

Jethro did not appear at the midday meal, which was no uncommon thing with him upon a working day, when he often had business far afield; but I had never known him absent before upon a Sunday.

And by supper-time the old blight had fallen once more upon him and upon my mistress, and the old gloomy silence stood between them as if it had never been broken.

And then I asked myself whether it had been in a dream that I had seemed to see their two souls for an instant meet across whatever mysterious barrier it was that held them apart, and meeting, know and greet one another with a smile.

CHAPTER X

HEMP-SEED ON HALLOW E'EN

ONCE, when upon All Hallows' Eve, we children had held high revel, Margaret was, as I remember, foremost among the *grown-ups* who had aided and abetted.

She it was who marshaled the blindfold troop before the three cups, containing respectively clear water, foul water, and emptiness, and who changed the positions of the vessels after each choice was made.

And it was she who, ranging nuts upon the bars for mates to be proved, by her adroit manipulation of the same, laid herself open to the suspicion that through it the Fates received now and then more than a hint.

Again it was Marget who dropped the molten lead into water, through the handle of the door-key, when young diviners required of the oracle information as to the setting of their lives in the future.

And Marget saw to the proper shoeing and muffling of the party all agog to sally, delight-

fully thrilled, into the murkiest corner of the kitchen-garden, there to pull the vegetable representatives of as yet unknown helpmeets.

Lastly, it was Marget who assisted at a ceremony which I confess has always seemed to me the most gruesome of its kind. For it was she who kept against any would-be practical joker the door of the chamber where the one whose courage bore the test stood before a mirror, to devour one half of an apple, and in her secret soul was thankful that no phantasm of a coming bridegroom stole out of the darkness behind her to eat the other half of the fruit from her shoulder—this being an occasion upon which an old maid has peculiar reason to bless her solitary lot, particularly if her nerves be insecure.

But, after going thus far, it was astonishing that a proposal to sow hemp-seed (purloined from the canary) in the avenue should be snubbed by Marget with as much steadiness as decision. Indeed, the nurse held with so much obstinacy to her point that her nurslings had nothing for it but, however reluctantly, to relinquish theirs, and to bob for apples in the back kitchen, until the tide of their disappointment should have in some measure subsided.

I had almost forgotten the incident before I heard from Margaret, during the relation of her

story, an explanation of her unexpected opposition to the performance of a rite which had seemed at least equal in innocence to any of those which she had been cheerful in countenancing.

"It was the last evening in October," she told me, "and Mrs. Silvester and I were sitting with our sewing beside the fire. But I was so taken up with certain thoughts of my own, that I wasn't paying so much attention as usual either to my needle or to her conversation, so that presently she remarked it, asking whether I had anything upon my mind, and what it was that I was thinking about?"

"And I replied, struggling that my tears might not drop with the words which I spoke, that my thoughts had gone back to that day last year, when my father had brought me home a pocketful of nuts, for he had always shown me whatever kindness and indulgence he could. And how we had sat together over the fire, cracking and eating them, when I, remembering the custom of the night, had set them side by side upon the bar, to stand for him and me—for we were used to call one another *sweetheart* when stepmother wasn't by—and how they had taken fire and had burned brightly together to the end. Which was different indeed from things as they had come to pass!"

"Why, then," cried my mistress, with a startled look, "what night may this be?"

When I told her, she hid her face in her hands, moaning, while she rocked herself.

"Alas the night! Alas the night! It is surely the most cursed night in all the year!"

"Nay," I cried, "not so, indeed, ma'am! For how could it be so when all the good dead who have died since any lived, upon it do keep festival?"

But she only laughed at me, a mirthless, bitter laugh, while she shook her head.

"Which shows how much—or how little—you know about it, Peggy! The festival of the dead may be what you say—I know nothing of it. But I know what All Hallows' Eve is upon earth, when the happy occupation of the saints elsewhere gives to all naughty imps and hobgoblins free opportunity to work their mischief undisturbed. And if there are guardian angels, surely to-night they leave us too! Don't you know, Peggy, that this is the night when evil spirits have power? when belated men are hag-ridden, and ghosts walk? when witches revel, and the moon hides her face, afraid of looking upon the spiritual wickedness which is reigning in high places?"

It made my teeth chatter to hear her speak thus, as if she believed what she was saying. But

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I had to keep a stout appearance before her. And so I laughed—in a way.

“Ah, Peggy,” she said at that, “you may laugh, and well for you that you can! But I *know*.”

“What do you know?” I scoffed. “Old wives’ tales?”

“No,” she answered, with a strange look, “but a young wife’s story. And, indeed, you deserve to hear it, if only that you may learn from it in future to keep a civil tongue in your head about matters which you don’t understand.”

“But I won’t believe it,” I cried, sore afraid of what I might have to listen to.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you!” she retorted, scoffing in her turn. “The pity is that your belief, or unbelief, will not avail to alter facts.”

So there was to be no escape for me. And she told me.

“When I was at school, there happened to be there a young lady from Ireland, where these things are understood and talked about more than they are over here. And she regarded *Hallow E’en*, as she called it, as of more importance than Christmas, or Easter either. She was full of tales of the way in which she was wont to spend it at home with her brothers and sisters and their friends, and of the fun and frolic which the occa-

sion brought to them. From which she went on to strange relations of people whom she had heard about, or had even actually met, who, by performing curious ceremonies at the right time, had come into startling contact with things of another world.

"Of course we laughed at her for her wild talk. But even while we laughed we wondered. For she had a tongue to win you to any creed which she chose to uphold. And she swore *by this and by that*, as she herself would have said, to the truth of all that she related, till our ears were charmed and our eyes dazzled, and our heads near turned with the glamour of it.

"Then she demanded of a sudden what was to prevent our testing the truth of her stories? And wouldn't it be entertaining if we inquired of the future for ourselves in the ways which she would show us, so that, upon the day when it came to pass, we should know whether she had spoken sooth to us or not?

"Well, we agreed that this was fair enough, and that it promised us plenty of amusement, if we could only compass it without the knowledge of our mistress. For that lady would never have allowed it, holding that, though marriage might be for some a necessary evil, and even a duty, there was no need to occupy ourselves with the

anticipation of it; while love was a subject which no well brought-up young lady would ever admit within the boundary of her thoughts—which I suppose was the reason why we scarcely ever discussed anything else during our half-hours of recreation in the garden.

“So this Irish girl and some of the elders amongst us banded ourselves together, promising one another to carry out, in spite of our guardian, all the traditional observances which should be explained to us. And when the proper night came, and preparations had been made, we crept out of the beds where we were supposed to be sound asleep, and met together to perform the stated functions, in some fear of the Evil One, but in much more of the housekeeper, or one of the teachers, or, worst of all, our awful governess herself, abroad in curl-papers and night-wrapper.

“But nothing occurred to disturb us, so that by degrees we became more and more bold, scarcely stifling our laughter, while we tempted one another to acts the bare thought of which, at the commencement of the evening, would have been enough to raise our hair with horror.

“And at last ‘Which of you now,’ cried our Irish friend, ‘is ready to go out alone into the dark, to sow the hemp for Another to reap behind her?’

"Wild as we had become, we paused at that. And one suggested that first of all she herself should go. But she shook her head.

" 'Think what you please!' she said, 'but you may know that it's no fear which keeps me from it. But last year I sowed my hemp, and *the right one* reaped it, and so I'll not ask the good people to be telling me any other story now, for the best or the worst of ye!'

"Then another inquired if it would not suffice to sow the seed within call of her companions, along the corridor, or even down the grand staircase?

"But again our instructress shook her head. 'It must lie out in the black night,' she averred, 'with the wind to blow over it, and the stars to shine down on it, and them under the earth to raise it, and them that won't enter a house to reap it.'

" 'And where the housemaid will not find it in the morning!' a girl added, at which we all laughed.

"But still we hesitated, till the Irish girl lost patience completely.

" 'Oh, the back o' my hand to the whole of ye, for a wheen skulkin' poltroons!' she cried. 'Haven't I told you that I've done no less myself, and to my everlastin' contentment? But I'm thinking how it's best indeed for you to stay safe

indoors. For why would the spirits trouble themselves with the likes o' ye?'

"And after that there was quarreling, and we went sulkily to bed again, and most of us to sleep as well.

"But—" and here my mistress paused before she continued, "one of the girls there had a wonderful curiosity to know what would happen, supposing she sowed the hemp-seed. Besides which, she would have liked well to show her Irish school-fellow that one may be as bold to beard the devil this side the channel as in Ireland. And the more she thought of it, the less could she resist the attraction of her thoughts, till at length, when all the rest were sound asleep, she rose once more, and hurried on her clothes, filling the pockets of her pelisse with the seed which the young Irishwoman had provided. Finally she stole to the garden door, where it was easy for her to let herself out. But in such fear was she of discovery from the house, that she dared not stay within sight of it, but climbed the wall—the gate being locked—and dropped into the road beyond, nearly losing her shoes in the descent.

"It was black enough there under the trees, but she was determined not to think, lest she should grow too frightened to perform. So she ran her very fastest for fifty yards or more, throwing the

seed behind her as she ran. And by that time her heart was beating so wildly with the quickness of her pace, and excitement, and dread of discovery or worse, that the hammer of it in her ears became a new source of terror to her, for she could not believe that it was but her own heart which she heard. And so she paused to listen.

“But now her fears were tenfold added to. For, though she might feel that heart of hers thump as before against her side, she could have sworn that the sound of it was at the same time outside herself, and that it beat upon the road! And at that, heedless of the rules of her witchcraft, but feeling that she must be reassured or die, she turned—and saw a monstrous form that followed her like a shadow, but scarcely so noiselessly, for it was the sound of its footsteps indeed which had mingled with that of her heart-beats.

“Her blood froze with the terror that held her motionless, so that she could neither run nor cry. For the thing was too great and too misshapen to be the form of any mortal lover, and she dared not think what she had raised. So there she stood helpless, right in the very middle of the road, and let it come.

“But when it was almost upon her, it bounded and swerved aside with a snort, and a scramble and a clatter of iron shoes upon the road, while a

man's voice exclaimed in loud tones of startled wrath. Then, her wits returning to her, the girl turned to flee whence she had come.

"But, the horse being by this time subdued, its rider turned it after her, calling to her to stop, and give an account of herself, or he would ride her down. And, to prove that he spoke in earnest, he put the horse from one side to the other of the narrow road, so that the girl, being now possessed with a good, wholesome, physical fright, screamed aloud as she entreated him, for mercy's sake, to let her be. Whereupon he, with an ejaculation of surprise, flung himself out of the saddle, to stand beside her on the ground."

Mrs. Silvester paused again. And I, seeing how much speech was costing her, tried to beg her to tell me no more. But my lips would frame no words, and presently she went on, though in broken sentences.

"He was gentle with her, and courteous. And he helped her to regain the garden. But first they saw each other's faces. And—she thought his was worth losing heaven for! Still, when he begged for another meeting, she strove to refuse, until he said, laughing, but with the masterful ring in his tone which she did not fear—yet, 'Nay, little lady! But you can not help yourself now, any more than I can help reaping what you have sown.

For that is our fate!’ And she—and she was glad. Because she would not have helped it, even if she could!”

My mistress hid her face, and I got up and went over to her.

“Hush, my dear,” I said. “You have told me more than enough.”

Which made her look up at me.

“Why, Peggy! am I then so tedious?”

“You can not think that,” I answered. “But alas! I know who that poor girl was—and the man—and I guess that my masters would not have us speak of them.”

She eyed me as though I had accused her of wrong-doing.

“I, too, have had commands from—my masters,” she said proudly, “and I do not disobey them. For all this, Peggy, happened before—it happened so very long ago.”

Dear heart! ’twas but a year ago that night! And yet she spoke truth; for in the history of her suffering it was indeed *very long ago*.

And, recognizing this, there swept over me the thought of the ruinous price, the life-long usury with which she had had to pay for the thoughtless frolic of half an hour. And I moaned as I knelt on the floor beside her:

“Oh, the cruel fate! The cruel fate!”

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"Fate?" she repeated dreamily. "Yes, that was it! As soon as I believed in fate, you see, it took bodily shape to overcome me. So you, my Peg-top, are wise in the unbelief of which you boast, for there is safety in it. Do not part with it, my dear, as long as you can hold it. And never sow hemp-seed, lest one should reap from it a rope to bind you, or—Ah, Peggy! Peggy! Why did I think of *that*?"

And there she fell into one of those trembling fits which had become frequent with her, and which I so dreaded, and it was nigh upon an hour before I could get her soothed.

So Margaret brought this chapter of her story to a close. And I, pondering it with dim, childish memories in my mind, knew at last the reason why the sowing of the hemp-seed had been so stringently forbidden to her nurslings upon All Hallows' Eve.

CHAPTER XI

HEARTACHE

AND now I felt that we were approaching the relation of that event in Mrs. Silvester's life about which I most feared to ask, because I longed most to hear of it. But, as Margaret seemed to my impatience slow in coming to it, I ventured at last to urge her, taking refuge in the semi-fiction where-with the sad young mother had herself beguiled her thoughts, when she had been waiting for her comfort.

“ And *Clarissa*, Marget dear? ”

Margaret's brown eyes grew melancholy at the word, even while she smiled upon me.

“ Ah, dearie, I mustn't expect much sympathy from you in our disappointment! Yet the disappointment was keen, God knows, when *Clarissa* came and was—a boy! ”

“ But Marget, did it matter? ” I protested, half impatient, half reluctant, to know that my joy should, however many years ago, have cost another woman pain. “ Though Mrs. Silvester had fancied that it was upon a daughter that her heart was

set, surely when she held her son in her arms she did as other mothers do, blessing her lot, while she forgot that she had ever looked forward to a different one?"

But Margaret's smile had faded, while the sadness remained in her eyes.

"It might have been so. And most likely it would have been so—but for me. And still my heaviest trouble is the knowledge that it was *I* who held apart that poor mother from her child."

I cried out at this, incredulously. "*You, Margaret? Impossible!*"

But she persisted.

"You see, there was that disappointment at the first. She had made so sure. And when she saw her blue-eyed Clarissa transformed into a funny brown mite, with black eyes, and a dark down all over his head, she was frightened, I dare say, as well as disappointed, for she turned from him. And then I, who have always been a fool where babies were concerned, fell into a smarting, angry jealousy for this one, and snatched him back to myself to carry him off. And though I refrained from uttering my thoughts to Mrs. Silvester—it would have been better, perhaps, if I had—I brooded over them, growing more bitter against her, as I sobbed to the innocent, 'Never mind, baby! If your own mother doesn't want you, Peg-

gy does. And you shall never go without a mother's love while Peggy lives, so help her God.' ”

If I had been older, I might have seen and judged these things more truly. But what was I myself in those days but a silly child? And one whose heart was nearly broken, too, and her head sore bewildered; for I had been so certain that things would brighten with us when the baby came.

And everything seemed to go against their coming right. For the doctor forbade Mrs. Silvester to nurse her infant—which indeed was seldom done by ladies in those days.

So I reared him by hand. And there being then no special reason why I should bring him to her, I—not forgiving her first shrinking from him—was in no mind to bring him, wanting a reason. While she, poor lamb! reading as I doubt not in my looks something of the grudge which my heart bore against her, was too proud to ask for him. Therefore it wasn't by living beside him, and watching the wonderful ways that children have, that she could grow to him.

And now, too, I had a care apart from her, and one that needed all the time and thought that I could give it. So that, although I never allowed myself deliberately to neglect old duties for new ones, remembering that the first of any must still be to attend on Mrs. Silvester, the truth is that my

heart, and my heart's longing, were always with the child, and that I grudged every moment that had to be spent away from him. And so the old companionship was broken.

Ah, my dear! I suppose that every one of us has passed a day, or perhaps but an hour or a minute, for which he would give the whole remainder of his life if he might have it back again. And, for me, I often feel that I would give everything that came after, only to be permitted to lay Mrs. Silvester's son in her arms once more—and to leave him there!

Margaret was weeping now for the mistake of nearly thirty years ago. And I did not try to comfort her. For what comfort is there for one who has committed a mistake? A sin may be repented, and forgiven, and forgotten. But a mistake lives for ever in its consequences, unforgotten by God, and unforgivable by man. Otherwise it would not be a mistake.

So I could only caress my poor Margaret in silence, and presently, when she had wiped her tears, say, to give a fresh turn to her thoughts on this sorrowful subject, "And what did old Mr. Silvester say to the baby, Marget?"

"I believe that he was pleased to hear of him," she replied, "as much as it was in his nature to be pleased by anything. But, indeed, at first I was

afraid to come in his way with the child, for his conduct to its mother had been nothing short of cruel."

The first time that it seemed to pass the bounds of his usual surly behavior to her, was upon a Saturday evening, after John Pounce had returned from Ryeworth market, which he attended every week to sell produce from the farm, and fetch this and that which might be needed for our house-keeping. For the masters never went into the town if they could help it, and they were not fond of letting me go there either.

Well, after supper John was, as usual, the first of us to leave the table. But, having reached the door, he now turned back, to say, "Janaway sends all his butter to Oxford now, for sixpence half-penny."

And immediately, in the same breath, "Betty Castle's back."

And either his first bit of news, or his second, fell like a thunderbolt into the midst of us. For I, who happened to be looking at my mistress at the moment, saw her turn as white as the table-cloth, while her eyes fastened in a flash upon Jethro. And he, for his part, stared back at her, as though he saw her drown before him, and couldn't stir a finger to save her. And the only one of us who was able to get out a word was the old master, who

jumped to his feet, shuffling up to John, as though something had affected his power of walking, while he exclaimed in a choking voice, "Curse you, Pounce! How dare you tell that lie?"

For answer John shook his head, blinking at him.

"It's a *lie*!" roared the master. And the despair in his tone showed well enough that he knew that it wasn't.

"It's no lie," John replied, seemingly unmoved.

"Who told you then? And be damned to them!"

"I seen her!" said John.

"Did she say anything?"

"Whist!" broke in Jethro, with trembling lips.

Mr. Silvester looked at him, and from him to my mistress. And the terror which was in her face seemed to drive him all at once beside himself, so that he shouted, in a frenzy of sudden savage exultation, "You white vixen! So the hunt is up, which shall run you down! Aye, you'll be run to your death yet, for me to see, and to know that Justice comes at length though she may tarry!"

There Jethro laid hands on him, trying to force him into silence, which made the old man turn upon him. But when his nephew asked, "Have

you forgotten, then?" the other's jaw dropped; and his hand went to his head, and he seemed of a sudden so old and so distracted that my heart couldn't but pity, even while it loathed him.

"Forgotten?" he repeated. "The honor of the Silvesters? Ha! ha!"

His laugh was shrill and cheerless, and still laughing hideously, so that she shrank from the sight, he turned once more to my mistress.

"Oh, go your ways, madam, and never fear me! You know that I would spend the last drop of my blood for you, though I might have yours—and only God and the devil know how thirsty I go for the want of it! What, though! Jethro and I will fight for you, to the death if need be. You may count on that! And—" through his teeth—"God forget you!"

But while my blood curdled to hear them, his wicked, wild words seemed to have no effect at all upon Mrs. Silvester, who was already occupied with a fear great enough to keep any other from reaching her senses.

She stood between Jethro and John Pounce, her eyes, strained wide, turning from one to the other of them, as though dumbly beseeching some relief from the terror that was torturing her. And, as Jethro marked her, his face for one moment

softened, quivering painfully, before he pulled himself together.

"Take your mistress away, Margaret," he said to me. "And you, John, stay for a moment."

Then he, too, turned to Mrs. Silvester with a sort of subdued fierceness flashing from the forced calm of his manner, like the glitter of a sword half drawn from its velvet sheath. But his fierceness was not like the fierceness of the old man. And I knew that the sword that leaped in its scabbard would be drawn in her defense.

"My uncle is right," he said to her, "and no harm *shall* touch you while we live."

Then I slipped my arm within hers, whispering her to come, which she did, like a lamb. And when we were upstairs,

"Don't speak to me, Peggy," she entreated, "but hold me fast, my dear!"

And indeed it was all that I could do for her, while a fear which I might neither explain to myself nor banish lay upon me like a spell, beneath which my heart cowered cold and sick, and I was dumb.

But I had not seen the last of that savage man's great hatred of her in the days before her child was born.

One night, close upon Christmas, it happened that Jethro had hurried from the parlor with John

Pounce, after supper, to give medicine to a sheep that was sick. And when my mistress rose she didn't slip away at once, quick, and thankful to be gone, as was her usual custom, but came instead slowly round the room to my master's chair, and stood before it.

I, being surprised at this departure from her wont, glanced quickly up at her then, and was struck by a new expression which her face wore, and which it gripped my heart to behold. Yet it was no look of suffering nor of fear, which I surprised there, but rather the look which a child's face wears when he stands upon the threshold of a room which has hitherto been closed to him, and learns that he is to enter it at last, to see whatever lies therein. And while one half of him is eager to rush in, to gaze, and to handle, the other half hangs back, loth to leave the safety of the things which it knows.

This thought flashed into my brain when I saw her pause before her father-in-law, with her eyes upon his face. But no answering look would he give her, though I perceived by the way he was scowling at the ground that he was well aware of her presence.

Then, "*Father!*" she said, in a voice that barely reached me at the other end of the room.

He started, though, as if it had been cried in

his ear. And truly it startled myself to hear her call him by a name which she had not given him since I had been in the house.

His look up at her—for it came then—was awful! I saw her blanch, meeting it, but still she persisted bravely. “Father! will you—will you not——?”

She could not finish. But she held out her hand to him.

And I saw him strike the little hand aside! And I heard him curse her! And afterward, in a voice as low as her own, while his terrible eyes looked deep into hers, he said,

“May you die!”

I ran to her then, for I don’t know what I expected. That she would faint, perhaps. Those three words, spoken *as though he meant them*, containing more terror than abuse or oaths.

She, however, neither fainted nor wept. Nor did she break out in anger against him. But, “Amen! Amen!” she murmured, as if she too meant what she said. And then she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. SILVESTER'S STORY

UPSTAIRS that evening she seemed much as usual, though perhaps a little more thoughtful. But later, having gone to rest, she called me to her bedside, and, "Peggy," she said, "shall I trust you?"

"If you please, ma'am," I answered, too coolly as it seemed to me afterward, but afraid to speak warmly just then, because my heart was on fire. And my coolness seemed to satisfy her.

"Sit down then, for I have much to say."

So I took a chair and sat beside her, till presently I found myself kneeling on the floor instead, to hide my face among the bedclothes, because she must not see it.

Not that she heeded me, nor what I did, for by that time there seemed to be a force within her that urged her to speak in spite of me, in spite—poor trembling thing!—of herself. And neither of us might resist it, though I saw the fever rising in her, while my heart sank down and down like a stone.

But this was presently. For at the beginning, though she had bidden me listen, it seemed that she found it too hard to speak. And in her effort to do so, her hands gripped and wrung the sheet, while her eyes stared into the dark corners of the room, so that I feared for her reason should such mental anguish be prolonged.

But, even as it seemed that something in her being must crack from the strain upon it, to my inexpressible relief the wild light in her eyes was suddenly quenched in tears, and the griefs too long pent up within her breast, burst from it at last, in a storm of sobs.

"Oh, Peggy, I thought that I knew all sorrow before this! But no anguish for herself which a woman may feel can equal the torture of her fear for another. And when that other is her child—! Peggy, Peggy, I fear for Clarissa!"

"Nay!" I said, trying to speak soothingly, though the tears were thick in my own eyes. "What can you fear for her? Is not your love waiting for her? And what is mine to speak of, beside that? But it is here, waiting for her too."

Her hand sought mine.

"It is because I know it—your love for her—that I tell you what you may do for her should the need arise, and I be—unable to do it. For if I am indeed soon to escape from this rough world's

bitterness—as, God forgive me! I most long to do—what rest can there be for my spirit if I leave one behind me more tender and feeble than myself, to struggle alone beneath the burden of disgrace which is the only heritage I have to bestow?

“What do you say? Are you trying to comfort me, child? To comfort *me*? And is it to comfort that I hear you murmur of *justice*?

“Nay! do I not know what the world’s justice is, which will be meted to my babe? Which will spare her body, indeed, because it has done no wrong. That, you will recognize as justice!—while it stains her life with a shame from which it may never be purified because it is not her own, but was her mother’s before her.

“For of course the offspring of the criminal may not be treated like that of the innocent. Else, where is Justice? . . .

“What! comfort again, Peggy, you inveterate consoler? Will nothing cure you of it? Do you protest against that word, which you say, none dream of applying to me?

“Then what of the old man downstairs, from whom you saw me part just now? Is it because I am guiltless before him that his look upon me was what you saw, or his speech what you heard? And one day, if I live, I know that all eyes that look

upon me will be like his eyes. Did you mark his eyes, Peggy?

"I have known this a long while—since the hideous time of the inquiry into Ambrose's death, when I met the hard looks of strangers turned curiously upon me. *They* did not know it then. They would have told you how much they pitied me. I knew better when I knew that, for a shred of evidence, they were ready to tear me in pieces!"

Her hand, which I had taken into mine, was very cold and trembling. I implored her not to let such cruel fancies sway her.

"Oh, girl!" she cried then, passionately, "how shall I make you understand? It is cruel, if you understand already, ever so little, to force me to explain! Have you never heard—rumors——?"

I stopped her. It was, as she said, cruel to force her to explain, and my own voice shook as I said, "You are right. I have heard—a rumor. But there is nothing in it against you. Do not dream it!"

Her face was ghastly, and I did not know her voice demanding, "Against whom, then?"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, hastening, if I might, to undo the harm which I had too plainly done. "I don't know! No one knows. Against nobody!"

She sank back again, panting. But she re-

covered from the effect of my words more quickly than I should have deemed possible, seeing what that effect had been. The little smile with which she strove to meet my eye, would have wrung a harder heart.

"You frightened me, Peggy! How you frightened me! Yet, if you speak truth, there was no need to be so frightened. And you do speak truth?"

I begged her to believe me.

"Well then, there we are, where we were. What was I saying? What did you say? That there is a rumor, but that it is against nobody? That will not be so for long. For rumor can not stay. It must always be moving, till somehow—God knows how—it reaches the truth—very nearly—with just a hair's breadth between—the hair's breadth difference, that is all the difference.

"And I have seen this rumor creeping toward me. And ever since my husband's death I have looked forward to the time when it must reach me—when they will say that *I have murdered him*—and then there will be an end of it—and of me.

"That, I say, is what I have looked forward to. It is my desert and my desire, which for once are one. But then, think, Peggy! If I am not here? Is my child to be delivered instead to their

tongues, to their—justice? What would her life be then? Doubtless they would say that they pitied *her*. God save her from such pity!

“And because I pray to Him to save her from it I am going to tell you—the truth, so that when the hour shall arrive, when I am dead and Jethro is dead, and my child is without a friend, you may publish it, as I charge you, that at least she may not wander through her life, outcast and forlorn in a just and pitiful world!”

What could I do then, dearie? It would have been worse than useless to tell her that her forebodings were without foundation. It was enough for her that she had them. And nothing short of her will would have soothed her. So, knowing that she *must* be soothed, I bowed my head upon her hand, and promised her that I would do according to her desire.

“But oh!” she sighed then, “it is harder to tell you than I thought. Harder to tell you, Peggy, than it would be to tell a stranger. Because I love you, my dear, and I must shame myself in your eyes. For you are not like the others, and you will not deem me innocent because my hand is free from blood, when my soul—my soul is scarlet!”

She shivered, and I might scarcely catch the meaning of the next few words.

"*I am* guilty, Peggy! Guilty of the sin which renders a man his brother's murderer, though he may never have lifted his hand against him. Guilty, too, of a cowardly refusal to bear my fate, which has plunged a noble soul into the abyss.

"Nevertheless, I know enough of the world and of men's judgments to be aware that, though I stand thus confessed sinful, shame-stricken, a murderess in will, if not in deed, it is not because of this that my child will suffer. Men will forgive her, as long as her mother has not broken one of their laws. And this I swear that I have never done. If I were now to publish my testimony, no one could because of it lay so much as a finger upon me.

"I know that Cornelius Silvester and John Pounce hold a different opinion. It has been my care that they should. And one day their opinion will be shared by others.

"But however this may be, it would be enough evil for my babe were her grandfather, for my sake, to hate her as he has hated me, when I am no longer here to stand between his hatred and her helplessness. And although I know that, by this time, his wrath is stronger than any reason for it, so that he could not forgive me, though I proved myself innocent, still my hope is that he may forget to bear a grudge against *her* when my memory

is blotted out—as it can not be while he cries for vengeance against it for the blood of his son.

“ Now, then, listen. I believe that it is already known how Ambrose Silvester secretly wooed his bride, and, winning her, brought her to his home. That she was not a happy wife is known as well. I have prayed to forget the details of her misery. But the thing which I can not forget is the face of Jethro Silvester as he witnessed it—how its usual melancholy indifference gave place first to astonishment, then to disgust, afterward to a passion of pity and wrath which a god might feel—selfless, awful—more terrible to me than the suffering which provoked it, and which, for fear of it, I tried to conceal from him.

“ I acted badly, for it is hard under torture to act content, and I had never been patient. But at least I did not flaunt my griefs to gain his pity. Rather, I shrank from it. To drive back tears which might have called it forth, I would lash myself into fits of impotent, sharp-tongued fury, to end, when Jethro could not see, in the bitterest self-humiliation.

“ But after much of the squalid misery and shame of such futile strife, there came at last a day when I was altogether mad. For I had learned a thing which it was anguish to my pride to know. I told myself that I could not bear it. Fool that I

was! As if there were *anything* which a woman may not bear—which some other woman has not borne before her! And if love has gone, surely pride may go after it.

“ But at the time I thought little of all this. I had been taken by surprise, and could think of nothing but the outrage which had been done me, and the vengeance which I desired. Yes, vengeance—I cried for that weapon of fools, which wounds the hand that wields it! I, a woman, because I endured pain, must fling my womanhood to the winds, and become a fury! Because I was hurt, I must hurt another. Knowing suffering, I could desire suffering for him. So, in an instant, falling to depths of conscious cruelty lower than his careless brutality.

“ As one who throws a sop to a yelping cur, he tried to stop my mouth. He sacrificed the partner of his guilt. And at that a burning contempt of him and of myself urged me beyond all prudence and all reason. It was little that I could say, but my words had power to sting, and so he tried to stop them by force.

“ I welcomed his violence. Bodily pain might still the tearing agony within. If he killed me, how much better! I took a fierce joy in tempting him . . .

“ Jethro dragged him from me. It steadied me

a little to witness the struggle between them. Ambrose was the stronger, but he was in liquor, and he wasted half his strength.

“Watching them, I became of a sudden filled with a panic terror of what I had done. I flew to Ambrose’s father. But no help might come from him, for he and his son had been drinking together, until he had fallen into the lethargy from which I could not rouse him.

“When I returned, Jethro was forcing Ambrose up the stair. He bade me go into the parlor, and shut the door. But I heard the battle of their feet—the only sound they made, neither having breath to spare for word or cry—as step by step they waged it, all along the passage overhead. Then a door banged, and the room where I was shook from the furious trampling, till, all at once, there was silence.

“I held my breath, listening, half hoping, for it to be broken; for such stillness, following such tumult, was scarcely to be borne. At length, unable to bear it longer, I ran to the door, which, even as I reached it, opened, and there I found myself face to face with Jethro.

“His breath was coming fast, and his hand shook, when he stretched it out to bar my way.

“‘He is quiet,’ he told me briefly. ‘I got him on to his bed, where sleep overtook him sud-

denly, as it sometimes will. He is best left to himself.'

"He avoided looking at me, until my silence compelled his eyes. Then, as they met mine, his face changed, and I began to tremble.

" 'I must go from here!' I said.

" 'You can not,' answered Jethro.

"It was what Ambrose had already said, but it was spoken with a difference. For Jethro did not storm, nor threaten, nor taunt me with my helplessness, which he stated merely as a sorrowful fact. The hopeless compassion in his tone broke me down.

"I went back into the room, to cast myself, weeping at last, upon the settle by the hearth, where Jethro stood before me, steadying himself with a hand against the chimney. He who had not hesitated to meet the wrath of a man maddened by drink, shrank now before a woman's tears.

" 'Don't cry!' he said at length awkwardly, like a boy. 'He shall never hurt you again.'

" 'Do you think that I care if he does?' I flashed back at him. And then, because I was untamed still, and wicked, and felt that the world was all too small to hold myself and Ambrose, I cried, '*Oh, God, that one of us were dead!*'

"And at that Jethro, turning pale, uttered one great sob, and left me.

"I passed the night there in the sitting-room, in a delirium of pain. I could not think, and I tried no longer to rebel: I only suffered. Two or three times I imagined that I heard a stealthy tread, a door open or shut, but I heeded nothing. For I had no fear, and no curiosity. The heavy snores of my father-in-law in the room beside me were like the regular sound-beats of some machine in hell for measuring the measureless torture of souls.

"It is strange that what first brought me to myself should have been a feeling of physical discomfort. I was cold. The breaking dawn brought chill airs that made me shiver. I roused myself, and sat up.

"The room looked weird and uncanny in the half-light, as a room for daytime living does before it is day. In sudden, foolish fright at its unfamiliar aspect, I fled from it, to the one where I had slept alone for the last few weeks. And there, once more, I sank into a stupor which was as far from sleep as from waking.

"It was full day when I finally came to a consciousness of things outside myself, and knew that there was an unwonted stir through the house.

"I can not tell you why fear should then have taken hold of me, like no fear that I had ever felt.

It taught me that Cornelius Silvester presently burst in to tell, with straining eyes, and a tongue that clove to the roof of his mouth.

“And, as he struggled to speak, he read my face, and saw that there was no need to relate *what I knew*. And I, recognising his further thought in his eyes, welcomed it with eagerness for Jethro’s sake and my own. For ‘now,’ I told myself, ‘Ambrose’s father will kill me, or he will deliver me to the fate which I merit, and I shall suffer, and there will be an end of it.’

“For the crime was mine. I claim it now as I claimed it then, though Jethro’s hand struck the blow. For his was but the hand of Fate, while it was I who murdered my husband in the hour when I hated him, and cried to be delivered from the horror of a life which he shared.

“I scarcely know what happened immediately after that, until I learned the end of my hope, nor how it was explained to me that a Silvester could not suffer public ignominy, and that the crime of Ambrose Silvester’s wife, though it was against himself, must therefore be hid. And so his father must long in vain for revenge, until I have pitied the old man for the torture of that unsatisfied passion.

“And Jethro? Does it seem strange to you that he has never spoken?

"You should rather honor the single-hearted sincerity of the man that can not lie! Did you know him, you would laugh to scorn the idea of a meaner reason for his silence. For the consequences to himself of his own acts, however terrible, are not the things which Jethro Silvester fears. But recognizing the truth as I have told it to you, surely he knows that the guilt of his cousin's death does not lie at his door.

"Yet he does not blame me. It would perhaps be easier for me if he did. And he has never allowed me to blame myself, silencing me whenever I have attempted to speak of the thing. It is done, he says, and he has neither condemnation nor justification to offer me because of it, though his silence is worse to bear than his uncle's savage denunciation of me—worse, I sometimes think, than my own soul's denunciation of itself. For it is always there, voiceless, cold, like a corpse; a horror which binds us together, yet must hold us apart for evermore.

"I have rebelled against it. In my reckless moments I have tried to ignore it, flaunting before Jethro my indifference to it; by laughter and gibes trying to provoke a quarrel, because we can not be friends. No wonder that he regards me as without heart or conscience! Yet it is because both are bleeding that I do them further violence,

as a wounded animal bites and tears its own quivering flesh.

“But why should I trouble you with all this, when these are not the facts which will be required for my own justification before the world? You will perhaps already have guessed the rest of them. How the Silvesters, aided by their old servant, to avert suspicion fired the bed where Ambrose lay, and how the verdict at the inquest proved the success of their scheme. The punishment which lay in the performance of such an act need not concern you.

“So all were deceived—save one. For that wretched one who had been driven from the door upon the previous day, returning in the morning, ‘for her things,’ as she said—God knows with what other intention or hope!—came in time to make the discovery which placed a hideous power in her hands. Yet none who heard her describe to the coroner’s jury what she had seen of the ruin and confusion wrought by fire and water—the lifeless form carried too late from Ambrose’s blazing bed, the old man, bereft of his son, laboring to save his home—guessed that her speech had been bought and paid for, word by word, or that it was not at the *extinguishing* of the flames that her masters had been at work when she had returned to the farm.

"Hence arose the fear which has haunted each of us since, and which you saw smite us upon that evening when John Pounce announced that he had seen Betty Castle in Ryeworth Street. For her absence had been part of the bargain with her, and she had sworn to live and die away from here. But, after the first shock of the news, Jethro reassured us, saying that surely she will not speak now, to gain nothing by it, nor own to a former perjury, for which the law has its punishment.

"And now, Peggy, I think that you know all the facts which should clear the memory of Clarissa's mother from a charge of crime, if such be ever brought against it. Neither do I own to complicity in any act that was done afterward to deceive justice. And, when questioned, I did not lie.

"What was it to my questioners if I did not tell all the truth, but let some circumstances escape me? If I said nothing of how Ambrose's father would have dragged me to the room where Jethro, to prevent my entrance, flung himself before the door? Or how I, rather than be a cause of quarrel between those two, escaped them both, and ran in of my own accord?

"Thank God, I remember now little of what I must have seen! Perhaps horror had dulled my senses, that they might not receive an impression which would be a more abiding horror to my recol-

lection. Nature often shows such rough tenderness to her hurt children.

“Yet one small detail remains with me, of which I have spoken to none. As I stood there, gasping, choked, my hand involuntarily clutching at the bosom of my gown, something snapped, and the locket-portrait of my husband, which I wore upon a gold chain upon my neck, fell to the ground. Once, to the lover who had hung it there, I had vowed never to remove it, and had kept my vow through days when its light weight upon my heart had become well-nigh intolerable, as it brought to my remembrance all that I had once believed in and hoped for. Now, and through no conscious act of my own, I was free from its presence. Can you believe that, callously, cruelly absorbed in myself, *that* was what I was thinking of when Cornelius Silvester, with his farm-servant at his heels, broke into the room after me, and I, suddenly aware of what horror the place contained, turned and fled from it?

“This, then, is all. And I could not add more if I would. For I am spent, and my hope is high that my time in the place where I have suffered is drawing to an end. May God have mercy on my baby there, and be very good to all who are good to her. Amen.”

CHAPTER XIII

HOW A MAN WAS BORN INTO THE WORLD

THOUGH the sound of Mrs. Silvester's voice had long ceased, I did not look up. My face was buried in the bedclothes. Every word uttered by my mistress had been burned into my memory, so that, after so many years, I believe that I have repeated them to you almost as she spoke them. And yet I could give her no sign that I had heard one of them.

"Peggy!" she called presently, and her voice was startled. But I might not lift my head.

"Peggy! nay, but you shall!"

She pulled back the clothes and tried to raise my face, and when I felt how weak her fingers were I could no longer resist their touch. But one glance at me was enough to make her fling away from me across the bed, weeping and wailing.

"What have I done? Alas! Peggy! I trusted you and thought that you would understand. But you are—just the same as the rest. Oh, God, if Jethro knew what I have done! If he ever

knows it, though I be dead, his scorn will reach me where I am! Couldn't I trust *him*? ”

She turned herself to me once more, her burning eyes on a level with mine, where I knelt.

“Peggy—are you listening, girl? Then, mark me well. Never, never, while Jethro lives, not for my sake, nor Clarissa's, nor for any reason, may you violate the silence which, while Jethro breathes, it is for him alone to break. That is his right. Promise me that you will not—and quickly, Peggy—lest I die cursing you and myself!”

So terrified was I by her violence, that I recklessly gave my word, as I would have given my soul just then, to soothe her. An oath was at the moment a light thing in comparison with the necessity of quieting her trouble, and, besides, the keeping of it lay away in the future, with the rest of the dark shadows which were gathering there.

Nor was it in vain that I thus bound my conscience, for almost immediately her excitement died away, and she heaved a great sigh, as though she were eased of a burden long borne.

Then she held me by the ears, while she prayed very solemnly that God would bless her Peg-top. And so accustomed was I grown to her ways, that I did not regard this as more odd and out of place than I should have done if she had laid her hands

upon my head and called me by my christened name.

Next day, toward evening, the child that should have been Clarissa was born, but never had I seen Mr. Silvester and his nephew quarrel so fiercely as they did over the question of calling a doctor to the farm.

Jethro got his way in the end, for he saddled the white mare and rode down to Ryeworth himself to fetch one, while his uncle, in a mad rage, halloed after him along the road, and even picked up stones to throw at him, one of which hit the mare upon the flank, and sent her plunging down the steep of the hill in a way which made me fear for Jethro's neck. But he reached the bottom without mishap, and presently came riding back, with the doctor, mounted on his stout little cob, at his side.

He had previously made me give him my word that there should be no gossiping, nor questioning, or at any rate no answering of questions, and that if Mrs. Silvester should attempt to make any sort of confession—there, stopping short, he hastily changed the word to *statement*—to the doctor, I would not allow it. And I scarce know how I answered him, with her words still sounding in my ears, and their meaning gnawing at my heart! But he had to be satisfied.

And all went well. And Mrs. Silvester was safe, and the infant healthy and strong. While, as for the doctor, he went and came while he was needed at the farm, without asking any inconvenient question, or taking notice by speech of anything there that lay beyond his province—though I fancied that he threw more than one curious glance around the place which had become of a certain notoriety in the neighborhood—for he had learned, like most hard-working people, that to mind his own business is as much as a man can hope to do in a day, while days are as short as they are now.

I was thankful, however, when he had come and gone for the last time, without having had an encounter with the master, who kept himself out of the way during his visits, as if owning himself beaten, and unwilling to look upon the evidence of his own defeat.

As for Jethro, hanging about with a hundred questions in his eyes which his lips couldn't utter—ah, but it's the dumb creatures which suffer!—I had to turn my own eyes from him quick, lest pity for him should creep through them into my heart. As if pity were a sin, or could ever harm the heart which harbors it!

The first time that Mrs. Silvester was able to come downstairs and take her place again among

us, a stranger seeing the family would have guessed that some calamity had overtaken it! For there was her father-in-law with no word of greeting for her, but with a blacker brow than ever. And John Pounce, like as if he was sitting on pins. And Jethro, with eyes quick and shining indeed, but the rest of him turned as it were into stone.

So the poor young thing herself, who on entering had shown a little more color than usual, grew gradually paler and more forlorn, while she sat silent amid the silence of the others.

Well! they were strange, unlikely folk, though I say it, and to you. And the baptizing of the child was of a piece with the rest.

For Mr. Silvester must do this in the broken font which stood within the door of the ruined church. And he had got hold of an old prayer-book from somewhere, and was more careful than I should have expected to read the good words from it correctly, so that, though the whole proceeding made me uncomfortable—for why shouldn't the poor babe have had benefit of clergy, like another?—I am bound to declare that I don't suspect him of intending any irreverence.

It was before Mrs. Silvester was about, and I, standing godmother, for want of a better, had asked her, as I thought only right, what name she would choose? To which she had replied that

Noel would fit the time of year, and that the boy might have a name with a glad sound in it, if there was to be nothing else glad about him.

But when, in answer to Mr. Silvester's command to name the child, I pronounced "*Noel*," as clearly as I could, what should he do, sprinkling the water, but say in that voice of his which always set up a throb in my heart, like the voice of a drum, and which sounded more strange and hollow than ever there, in the lone, empty church, "*Ambrose*, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

And there it was done! And I had to tell his mother.

She answered never a word. But it was only from necessity that I ever thereafter heard her call her son by his name.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHERE IT HAPPENED"

THE life that we lived for a while after that was so strange (remarked Margaret musingly) that I often asked myself whether I were now asleep and dreaming, or whether what had gone just before had not been imagined in a dream. Not that there was anything to astonish in our present every-day doings, which were quiet and commonplace enough. But it was their very quietness which had grown into a wonder. For how should faces remain unchanged, and hands continue to be busied about trivial occupations, where hearts held a secret such as that with which mine at least was bursting?

Such thoughts, however, I felt must be kept to myself. For my mistress never spoke again of that which she had uttered upon the night before little Ambrose's birth, so that I might not guess if she regretted the revelation then made to me under stress, or if she had wholly forgotten it. And so it raised, rather than demolished, a barrier

between us, which I dared not approach by so much as a look.

Still, as the days wore on, I became conscious of many undercurrents in the calm waters upon which I seemed to myself to be borne helplessly along. For Mr. Silvester's hatred of his daughter-in-law surely increased, as well as her weariness of body and of mind and the lessening of her laughter. And there was besides some strange dumb conflict with himself whereby Jethro was torn, and which I fancied that Mrs. Silvester was watching likewise, at first with eagerness, which afterward turned to a bitterness that would be expressed in a sneer, wounding herself worst as she uttered it. But the effect of such strife upon Jethro was most pitiful and to be wondered at, for he looked oftenest at that time like a man who, in the hour of a victory, has gotten his death-blow.

But for me, the horror which had once oppressed the long hours dwindled by degrees, before their manifold and pressing duties, into a thing so vague and far that I was able sometimes even to forget it. And then I was more content than I had been at any time since the infant days when I had made believe to nurse baby-brother. For now I had little Ambrose to nurse and to love, and he, growing amazingly and taking notice early, learned to know and to love me back again, till he

would laugh and crow as soon as he caught sight of me, in that small, merry voice of his that seemed to set care at defiance.

But when he began to cut his teeth he fell ill more than once over it, so that I was racked by the poor mite's pain as well as by the necessity, as I believed, of not disturbing his mother with it. If I had but known that suffering is often the best cure for suffering! If I had kept my place, to let her find hers!

Instead of which, in my ignorance and inexperience, I only tried to keep her in her painful ease, and to guard her from anything that might break it. And I succeeded too well!

To do this, however, I needed a room for the baby more out of hearing of his mother's than was my own little chamber next to hers, which was, besides, I thought, little suited to be the nursery of the Silvesters' heir. For I had as magnificent ideas about this poor, tumble-down family, which, after all, I neither respected nor loved, save in the persons of my mistress and her child, as has any old retainer about the noble house which he is proud to serve.

Therefore, knowing that there were rooms upstairs unoccupied, one fine morning I started to go through the house, with baby on my arm, to seek and find, if I might, the one that should be fittest

for him. For I thought it wiser, upon several accounts, to make my arrangements first and to ask leave of my masters afterward.

There were, at the end of the passage that was farthest from Mrs. Silvester's rooms, two doors, behind which I hoped to be able to find what I wanted. But the first, when I opened it, led me into a place that could scarcely be called a room at all, so narrow was it and so dark—more like a length of the passage itself cut off and lit by a tiny window at the end. It was full of all manner of old lumber too, and I saw at a glance that it wouldn't be worth clearing out. And the second door, when I tried it, was locked.

I was considering whether I dared go to Mr. Silvester for the key, with an explanation of why I wanted it, when it came into my head that possibly I might find another in the house to fit the lock, which seemed a common one. For if this room were no better than the first, I need not trouble my master at all, and it was a thing I always shrank from doing, seeing how it put him out, though I am afraid that he never gave me credit for so much forbearance.

Sure enough, when tried, my own key fitted the lock, and I entered with baby, shutting the door carefully behind us lest any one should pass while we were within.

And then, having time to look round me, I saw a strange sight, and the memory of what I had heard made it a dreadful one as well. For all the chamber, which had been furnished as a bed-room, was blackened by fire, and a smell of smoke and burning hung about it yet. What remained of the bed was such a wreck as to be scarce recognizable, and the wall at the back of it was scorched and the ceiling above, so that no plaster remained on either. The floor too was here burned away, so that the joists appeared below, and one had to be careful of one's feet, lest they should crush through the charred boards. Marking which, I wondered that Mr. Silvester should care to let the place continue in such a dangerous state, and not be afraid rather of the whole floor giving way some night, and falling down upon him as he lay in his bed under it.

But what at the time struck me as most extraordinary was that, while the damage was so great, it was not even greater. For, although one side of the room was a ruin, the fire seemed scarcely to have touched the other. The window was whole, though all the panes had been cracked by the heat, and the washing-table and bureau standing beside it had escaped with blistered varnish. There was even a bit of carpet there which still showed a pattern of roses, while, as I have said, beside the bed the boards themselves had been burned through.

Well, I had very soon seen enough to show me that here could be no nursery for little Ambrose, and glad I was that I had said nothing to anybody about it before entering the doomed chamber. For now nothing need ever be said, and my only remaining desire was to escape from it as quickly as possible, and forget it as soon as I might.

These were my thoughts, crossing from the window to the door on my way out, when, as I gingerly skirted by the bed, the child, who had been fidgety and was marvelously strong and determined for his age, gave an unexpected plunge almost out of my arms, so that I caught him back in sudden fear of letting him go.

And, at the moment, it seemed to me that the thing I did do was as bad. For, in clutching at him, I dropped the key, which I had been afraid to leave in the lock lest it should attract the attention of any passer-by outside, and so had carried carelessly hung upon my finger. And, as ill luck would have it, it fell where the flooring had been most destroyed, through a hole in the boards, somewhere down among the rubbish lodged upon the beams beneath.

For a moment I was stupefied, and could only stare after it, where I thought that it had disappeared. But soon, knowing that at all costs I must recover it, I shook my wits together, and pre-

pared to do my best. And first I laid the baby in the corner by the window, where he would be safe, and I hoped that he would be quiet. And then, kneeling as close as I dared to the hole in the flooring, I made a long arm, and began to grope there.

Of course I was black to my shoulder at once, and, clutching desperately with my fingers where I could not see, I brought up handfuls of dirt, charred wood, ashes and dust, but never the thing that I sought.

So, half distracted, I tried then in other holes, where it might have dropped. For, occupied with baby, I hadn't exactly marked the spot. But there my success was no better.

And now, to add to my worry, the boy, angry at being left by himself upon the hard floor, started to kick and cry in a way which promised soon to disclose our whereabouts to as many as had ears to hear him.

So I must rise to go to him, but first made a last, hopeless sweep with my hand through the horrid stuff which it made me shiver to touch. And there, my fingers closing upon something hard and cool, I snatched it up instinctively, and scarce knowing why. For, alas! I knew that it was not the key.

What it was I never took the trouble to find

out before I hurried back to the child, whom I endeavored to soothe by all the arts in my power, which generally availed.

This time, however, little Ambrose was not to be pacified. For his feelings had been hurt by my neglect, which he proved by kicking and roaring, until I told myself in despair that carry him away I must, if I had to leave the room unlocked behind me.

But this was surely a day of misfortunes! For I had not reached the door before it opened, and it was Jethro who stood with the handle in his hand, looking at me.

Now this seemed at the time, for some reason which could scarce be explained even to myself, absolutely the most terrible thing that could have happened to me. And I started back from him in a way which, I have since thought, must have made me appear in his eyes more guilty than I was, though it was little about any guilt of mine that I was thinking.

If he had spoken I might have plucked up courage to reply. If he had accused me I should certainly have defended myself. But how was I to defend myself against a look?

So I stood before him until my knees failed under me, and I did what I've scorned myself for whenever I've thought of it since. For I was so

frightened and flustered, and had received so many shocks at once, that I just dropped my face to the baby in my arms, and burst out sobbing and crying and to rival him!

That caused Jethro to speak. "Hush!" he said. And, in spite of everything, his word had such force with me still, that I did hush when I heard it.

Then, though with an effort, as though his tongue found such speech too hard, he questioned me as to the reason for my being where he had surprised me. And this was a relief, for soon I had told him all.

"And that's all about it," I ended desperately, "whether you can believe it or not!"

His brow had cleared wonderfully as I spoke, but his tone was not very reassuring when he said: "Why shouldn't I believe it? According to your own telling, you have been officious and indiscreet. You would have done better to have confined yourself to the duties which had been given you to do."

"Yes, sir!" I answered. And I declare that I felt as humbly as I spoke. Only it would come into my head that perhaps it was well for little Ambrose that I had been able to do for *him* something over and above the duties which had been pointed out to me!

Jethro cast a glance round the room, and then a sharpish one at me.

"I daresay that you have heard of the accident through which my unfortunate cousin lost his life?" he asked.

And I replied, "Yes, sir," again, hanging my head to hide that which I thought he must read in my eyes.

"This is where it happened," he told me, which there was little need for him to do.

I nodded then, for I could not speak.

"About the room for *him*," Jethro went on, regarding baby, who was still screaming. "It wasn't such a bad idea of yours, if you had but mentioned it to me at first. We will make him a nursery in my room, which is a good one, and far enough from Mrs. Silvester's."

"And you, sir?" I tried to ask. But I believe that no sound left my lips. And I had to struggle against the conviction possessing me, that, if we continued thus to discuss commonplace affairs amid these surroundings, I must break off from them, to scream.

"Get away with him now," continued Jethro; "and presently, when John and I have had time to work it, you may settle him into his new quarters. You say that you have lost the key which let you in," he added, "so I must fetch the one

which belongs to the room, and—you need never try another."

"Indeed I won't!" I cried, so earnestly that he must have trusted my intention.

But his words had put me in mind of something else, and involuntarily I glanced at that which I had found beneath the flooring during my search for the key, and which I now perceived to be an open locket, containing the portrait of a handsome young man, whose complexion of milk and roses may have been the painter's fancy, for it agreed very ill with the color of his bold black eyes and raven curls. Turning it round, I read upon the back of the locket the initials A. and S., worked in tiniest pearls upon the gold.

"What's that?" asked Jethro quickly.

I handed it to him in silence, afraid to speak, and his face changed as he received it. "Not *here*?" he asked, his voice sounding hollow.

For some reason, I dared not utter the word which should contradict him, and so I nodded my head.

He hid the thing away hastily in his pocket, and made an effort to recover himself, speaking lightly, though he had to moisten his lips at every few words, and horror was looking at me through his eyes.

"Of course! For it belonged to poor Ambrose.

He had it, and it must have dropped when—only to be expected, wasn't it?"

Once more I bent my head, while the presence of Jethro and the sound of his voice were swiftly growing insupportable to me. My nervous desire to escape from them had chased every other thought, and all capability of reasoning, out of my brain, when I made as though I would pass him.

"One moment!" he said, placing himself in front of me.

I made myself look at him, and wondered then if my face were as ghastly as his own.

"No need," he went on, "to mention this to Mrs. Silvester—or indeed to any one. For her it would but awake painful memories."

"Yes," I answered. If only he would not speak! But he had not done yet, though his face was set, as if to painful effort, and his eyes couldn't meet mine.

"Not that it would signify if you did! You understand that? But—why reopen old wounds?"

"I will not speak of it, sir," I replied, as steadily as I could, and went away from him with a load upon my spirit like the one which had fallen there upon the day when he had given me a false reason against Mrs. Silvester's going to church.

For, whatever Jethro Silvester was, and little

as I liked, or had reason to like him, it hurt me to see a proud nature humbled through an unworthy fear. And I knew that to tread in crooked ways must cause the feet of such an one to bleed.

But it was not long before a fresh trouble, which still had Jethro for its center, drove every other thought about him out of my mind.

CHAPTER XV

HOW JETHRO WAS ANGRY, AND MARGARET WAS DUMB,
AND MRS. SILVESTER SPOKE, AND LITTLE AMBROSE
CRIED UPSTAIRS

I CAN see, now that those days lie together behind me (said Margaret, in explanation of her last words), that Jethro had never been well since I came to the farm, though for how long he was ailing before that, I can't tell you. But at the time I was slow to recognize it, for his habits were not those of a sick man, nor of one who had to consider his health in any way. He had had a cough, indeed, through the winter, which used to trouble me at first, but he always refused my offers of hot drinks, or conserves to soothe it, in a manner which soon made it clear that such attentions were little to his taste. He would go out in every weather too, working as long and as hard as tough old John Pounce himself. And the others, accustomed, I suppose, to the sound of his cough, took so little heed of it that I soon grew heedless too, and forgot to think about it, even when spring had come, and he was no better.

But upon the afternoon of the day when I had seen the burnt room, as I was taking in clothes from the lines in the drying-ground, John Pounce came, in the way which he thought was running, his feet apart, and his knees knocking one another, while his arms worked like two flails, so that if he'd only been running on his hands there'd have been a chance for him to get along. And as soon as I saw him I thought of little Ambrose, whom I'd left fast asleep in the house, and I guessed that Patch, who was as clumsy as his master, had upset the cradle, and that John had never thought to pull the child out from under it before he should smother!

So I set out running, on my part, to meet him, shouting as I neared him, "What is it, John? Speak up, for your life, now, if you never speak again!"

"Master Jethro!" cried John, with his eyes staring out of his head, "quick! he bleeds!"

It was too much to expect that he could tell me more of his meaning, or where Jethro was to be found. But he pointed up to the roof, where, of course, he couldn't be; and so, reaching the house, I flew upstairs as fast as I could, but—God forgive me—with my heart like a feather because it wasn't little Ambrose.

It was a pitiful thing I came upon, nevertheless, in the dark passage-room which I had reject-

ed for baby, and which, it seemed, Jethro had been employed in clearing out, with John's help, for himself, in order that his own might go to his little cousin.

And he must have strained himself by lifting something that was too heavy for his strength, which had brought on a bleeding from the lungs. For there he lay now, in the midst of dirt and confusion, where he had fallen in a dead faint across the bed, which wasn't even made. And a bright stain of red blood out of his mouth was soaking into the mattress beneath him.

The tears rushed into my eyes to see him lying there, so big, and yet so helpless, but there was no time for crying over him. I can't tell you now what I did, nor why I did it, knowing nothing at all about this sort of sickness; but after a little he seemed to be reviving, and I could turn from him to John Pounce, who was watching from the doorway, and whisper him to ride the mare as quick as he could, to fetch the doctor.

But, if you believe me, the fellow refused to budge till he should have Jethro's own order to do so!

Perhaps I shouldn't have been as angry as I was with him, for, after all, his pig-headedness came from a sort of faithfulness which made him hesitate to go against what might be his master's

will. But there are different ways of being faithful, and I wasn't in the humor to admire John's way just then.

I'm afraid that, in my eagerness to convince him, I even forgot myself so far as to attempt to do so with my hands. But I might as well have hoped to shake or beat my own wooden clothes-horse into the white mare's canter, as by any such means to hustle John into a course which it wasn't his nature to follow. And so, from very shame, I left off almost as soon as I had begun.

And then a little voice, speaking from behind Mr. Pounce, moved him quicker than I could do, with all my strength of arm or of tongue. "Peggy!" it said, half-curious, half-afraid, "what is happening here?"

At that John, who a moment before had seemed rooted in the doorway, made a plunge into the room, which nearly knocked me over, and stood himself at the foot of Jethro's bed, facing round with a desperate air, as if it was in his mind to protect his master against a danger from which, however, he would himself greatly have preferred to flee.

I told my mistress shortly what the matter was, with something of my opinion upon it, which I could not keep to myself. But I was fair moidered while I spoke, wondering whether I dared leave

the lad to those who knew even less than I did what to do with him, and myself ride down to Ryeworth, without any notion how to manage a horse, supposing I happened by good luck to find myself upon the back of one—wondering also where the old master was, and whether the trouble would grow, or be less if I appealed to him. For one never can tell what may happen by the mixing of a man of his temper in any affair.

As I've said, all these thoughts being in a hurly-burly together within my brain, it wasn't to be expected that my explanation would be very clear, and I wasn't surprised when Mrs. Silvester, as if she was tired of listening to it, quietly slipped away from the doorway, and disappeared without a word. For, somehow, when there was hard doing or thinking to be got through, I looked for no more help from her than might have been given in the same case by her infant. Then, not knowing what else to do, and cheered by the return of his consciousness, and a little of the color to his cheek, I went on ministering, as I was able, to Jethro. And Time stood still, as he does when, out of joy, or sorrow, or fear, one is able to forget him, so that it seemed no more than a few minutes before I was surprised by the Ryeworth doctor himself coming in, and bending over Jethro, to look at him.

It would be tedious for you to hear of the days

through which we fought that illness. And Jethro himself fought harder than any of us, and, being determined to conquer, seemed for a while to have done so. For he was up and about, and even in the fields again, before the doctor could be brought to say that it was safe for him to leave his bed.

"You're a maniac!" he exclaimed angrily, one day, when he had come unexpectedly, just in time to catch him facing the east wind to carry food to the ewes, for it was a late season in the pastures. "You ought to be tied!"

Jethro laughed, looking down at him, and invited the old gentleman to tie him. Whereat the other pouted, like a crossed child, in a way he had which was funny to see in a man of his rusty age.

"Anyhow, there's no use of my coming here just to see my orders set at nought, and disobeyed!" he grumbled on. "And I'm not going to waste my time doing it. So, at your next breakdown—which, judging by the rate at which you're going, isn't, let me tell you, so very far off—Mrs. Silvester may, if she isn't tired of the expedition, come and fetch me again. And you needn't fear my troubling you before!"

As he mentioned her, he looked from the door, where he was standing beside Jethro—I being at work in the kitchen behind them—into the sunshine outside, where my mistress was to be seen,

bending over one of the beds in her little flower garden, where she worked by fits and starts, as the mood was on her.

"*Mrs. Silvester!*" cried Jethro. And then it came into my mind that, up to this moment, I had not learned how word had first reached the doctor of his being needed at the farm on the day of Jethro's attack.

"Naturally you did not know," he replied to the young man's exclamation. "But it was Mrs. Silvester indeed who brought me when you had been taken ill. I was out, but luckily not very far away, when I met her galloping down Ryeworth Street on that white mare of yours, looking like something from another world, and all the folk gaping after her as if she had been Queen Mab herself!"

Jethro uttered something beneath his breath, and the doctor glanced curiously at him.

"*Somebody* must have called me," he said. "And——"

"Of course!" stammered Jethro. Yet he turned, and gave me a look which scorched and shriveled me like fire.

The doctor marked it, and added good-naturedly:

"And this good girl had quite enough to do at the moment, without scouring the country a-horse-

back. Indeed, it was well for you that she stayed at home! ”

“ No doubt! ” agreed Jethro. But something in his tone caused me to shiver, and this, after the hot fit which had just been on me, made me wonder if I had not taken a fever.

The doctor, however, seemed to notice nothing, as he scrambled upon the block, by which his horse, accustomed to waiting, was standing like a monument.

“ Well,” he said to Jethro, “ then I’ll wish you good-by. And better luck than you deserve! ”

And at that the horse, shaking his stump of a tail, walked slowly and sedately out of the gate, where Mrs. Silvester, who had run to open it, stood ready to smile her farewells.

Jethro turned back into the kitchen.

“ So,” he began to me, “ you allowed Mrs. Silvester to ride alone to Ryeworth? ”

I replied nothing, knowing nothing that it would benefit me to say. For to explain that this was the first that I had heard of Mrs. Silvester’s ride would have been only to confess my neglect of the duty laid on me by Jethro himself, upon my first arrival at the farm, when he had warned me that I should be expected to know at every instant where my mistress was, and what she was doing. And that it was in order to attend to his own needs

that I had thus disobeyed his commands would be, I felt sure, no excuse for me in Jethro's eyes.

Indeed, as I thought of it, it even ceased to be one in my own, so that I might not comfort myself with the idea that he was unjust. And I went so far as to consider that maybe John Pounce had been in the right, after all, when he had refused so obstinately to act without orders.

But, luckily for me, this was not the light in which everybody could regard the affair; and when Mrs. Silvester at this moment came in from the garden, it didn't take long for her quick eyes to discover that something had gone wrong.

"Why, Jethro," she cried then, "what have you been saying to Peggy, to make her look like a cat that's been caught at the cream?"

Truth to tell, it was very little that Jethro had had time to say, but at the reproach in her tone the color flew into his face.

Mrs. Silvester next began calmly to wash her hands, which were all muddied with garden dirt, in the basin at the sink where I was employed rinsing her fine muslin collars and handkerchiefs—and this put me about worse than ever—while she continued to address Jethro over her shoulder.

"I may tell you at once, being ignorant of all the facts of the case, that Peggy is in the right. She always is, which is quite the worst of Peggy!

So it will save time and words for you immediately to acknowledge your error, without troubling her to prove it. I find it the best way myself, and the shortest in the end, and that it inclines Peggy to mercy."

I couldn't even beg her to stop her nonsense—which grated on me at the moment—lest I should break down when I tried to speak. So, finding herself unanswered by either of us, she first looked at me more attentively, before she turned again upon her cousin with quite another air, and with tears of anger in her voice.

"Have you no heart at all, Jethro? Have you no gratitude, nor sense of decency even? If Peggy had committed every crime in the calendar, *you* at least should—not forgive her—don't dare to think that I am asking your forgiveness for her! But bless her for it, and say that she did well, and believe that, and—and stick to it!"

I don't know which of us was more astonished by this outburst—Jethro or myself—nor whom it put more out of countenance. But then she attacked me almost as violently as she had done him.

"Do you think that I am ignorant of what you have been doing, because I said nothing, and *let* you do it? Do you think that I haven't seen you spending your life to save his? You have allowed yourself no ease. You—child!—have done the

work of three women, and would have done it till you dropped. Ah, you may hide your eyes—the tell-tales! For nights you had no sleep, and even now there is no night in which you do not wake every hour——”

“Oh, hush!” I gasped. But it was Jethro’s voice which brought her to a pause, demanding, in a tone I did not know, “How did *you* learn this?”

And at that Mrs. Silvester’s eyes began to shine, and her face to brighten and glow, as if a fire had been kindled within her, and she held up her head and looked at him. But her voice was very low as she asked, “Do you think that *I* slept?”

Then Jethro turned pale. But his eyes too shone, until it seemed that she was dazzled. For she turned back to me, to catch me in her arms, and hide her face close against me, half sobbing: “Oh, Peggy, I have wanted you to know—that you might not think me more selfish or lazy than I am. Why did you never say *help me*, that I might dare? For I was a coward, and so I let you work alone, while I—shivered alone in the passage!”

Jethro could scarcely have heard the last words, which were breathed in my ear. But I caught another glimpse of his face, over her shoulder. And the voice of little Ambrose, crying upstairs, at that

instant seemed to me the voice of an angel, telling me what I should do.

So I loosened myself from my mistress, as gently as I might, and turned my back upon her, without answering her, or so much as looking in her face again. And beside her baby's cradle I tried to pray for her, but knew not indeed what to ask, so dumbly poured my love for her, with my tears, where, as I believe, no love and no tears are ever rejected or wasted.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW MARGARET MET WITH BETTY CASTLE

LITTLE Ambrose was hushed, and asleep once more, when my mistress, coming upstairs, passed slowly along the passage until she came to the open door of the room where we were, and paused at it.

Hearing her there, I looked up, and as soon as I saw her face I held out my arms for her, for I had no words to meet the joy or the sorrow in it.

So she ran in to kneel beside me, leaning her arms upon my knee, and gazing upwards with that look in her eyes which broke my heart, until I might bear it no longer, but rebelled against it, fiercely demanding, "Why? *Why?*" though too well I knew the answer to that question.

She shook her head.

"But never mind, Peggy," she whispered softly, as though it had been I who needed comfort, and her place to give it to me. "It never may be, but *it might have been*, which is more than many can say of their happiness."

"Don't speak in riddles," I begged her, "for my heart is sick trying to answer them!"

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"Ah!" she replied. "But don't you know that Life itself is the riddle which Fate, the Sphinx, asks of each of us? And when we can not answer, she devours us!"

I couldn't imagine then what she was talking about. But later, when Ambrose was a schoolboy, he told me the story of the creature with the cunning human brain, but a beast's dull belly and tearing claws. And then I knew.

Now, however, I only breathed sadly to myself, "Never?" And "*Never?*" I repeated aloud in my wrath. For rebellion still burned within me as I thought, "Have a man and a woman been created, to beg one boon from Heaven, and to be answered with that word?"

She shuddered a little.

"Have you then to be told, Peggy, that Fate is stronger than Life? It is stronger than Death, my dear, which they say separates for but a little while. For, as long as Jethro is Jethro and I am I, this Fate of ours must hold us apart."

I believed that she spoke the truth, and I could no longer protest. Yet neither could I bring myself to agree. So, mechanically rocking the cradle, I kept my eyes upon the ground, and waited for her to speak again.

When she did so, her change of tone was startling.

“ So Jethro was scolding my poor Peggy! But what was it all about? ”

Perceiving that the subject which had occupied us was painful as the touch of red-hot iron for her thoughts to dwell upon, I dragged my own away from it to answer her.

“ Because, when he was taken ill, I let you ride for the doctor,” I blurted out.

“ There were reasonableness and gratitude, upon my word! But never mind, Peggy. For that ride was worth a scolding—especially one administered to another person! Do you know—I am half ashamed to confess it—though fear for Jethro was pressing down my heart, it could yet rise, like a flame, when the air rushed, singing, by me, and these fields, of which I am so dead sick, lay behind, and I saw the homes of men and women once more, and their faces—such faces! They made such great eyes at me, Peggy, I laughed to see them! ”

“ Yes,” I answered, “ and the thought that they had stared and wondered was more than Mr. Jethro could bear. I saw *his* face when the doctor told him.”

“ And perhaps he was right, if he marveled—as I marvel myself, when I think of it—that I ever came back! Ah, Peggy, I advise you never to let me away again, for I don’t believe that a

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second time it is in me to return. Yet once I could have wished myself safe in prison again!" she added, in an undertone, as though she were thinking aloud.

"And when was that?" I asked, though I scarcely supposed that she had spoken to me.

Whether or not, she answered me now:

"When I thought that I saw among the strange faces by the way, one that was not strange, but which I had hoped never to see again. It vanished while I looked, as a face in a dream vanishes. And I might have thought it nothing else if I had not remembered—something that John Pounce told us, a little while before I was ill. *That* was no dream, Peggy?"

I shook my head sorrowfully, for her tone had been wistful.

"Yet you have heard nothing—of *her*—since?" she pursued.

Once more I shook my head, and the anxious lines were smoothed from her brow. For neither of us could guess then how soon I was both to hear and to see something more of Betty Castle.

It was in the month of April, when I was on my road back to the farm, after the second of my quarterly visits home.

I interrupted Margaret:

“ They let you go home sometimes, then? ”

Not very willingly I can tell you! And I should scarcely have gained such an indulgence at all, had not Mrs. Silvester wrung it for me from my masters, by such importunate begging as left them no peace, and to which she would never have stooped to obtain any gratification for herself.

There was another of the fairy stories which little Ambrose used to be busy about in his lesson-books, when he went to school, and which he would relate to me, about a living man who once went down among the dead, to fetch his young wife from their midst. And the only condition under which he might take her was that he cast no backward glance upon her before the sun had shone again upon her beauty—a condition, poor fellow, which he must have been more or less than a man to be able to fulfil.

Well, the first time that I heard of him from the boy, I was reminded of myself, returning to the world which I knew, from that sad little world apart, where I had been buried for long months as surely as though I had lain there beneath the sod. For I too went back with a strict injunction laid, not on my eyes indeed, but on my tongue, which must speak to nobody so much as one word of those among whom I now dwelt, nor of anything seen or heard in their house.

And happily it was easier for me to obey this injunction than it might have been for another, with friends at home eager to hear from her the events of her daily life, and this and that about those whom she had gone out to serve.

For father sat now, day in, day out, beside the hearth, whether there were a fire upon it or no, speaking little, and heeding nothing outside himself, but now and again smiling or groaning, just according to his mood at the moment.

For that which we had taken at first for the stiffness of rheumatism had proved to be nothing better than the wearing-out of old age and hard times, which had now reached his brain, rendering it as helpless and weary as his body. And Mr. Ussher had been right when he had told me that he would soon forget even to fret for me. For he fretted for nothing now, unless it might be that he couldn't find his pipe, or had no tobacco to put in it. Neither could anything please him. And I tried to be thankful that it was so, for, if he wasn't glad to see me come, he would grieve the less when I had to go.

And when I put my wage into stepmother's hand, she said, after she had counted it, "Well, girl, that's right! And it is but just that you should help support your father, who's a sore burden on me. But if the Lord will but see fit to re-

lieve us before your next quarter-day, you shall keep enough then to buy a handsome black gown for yourself."

And when I burst out crying at this, and told her that if father was taken I should never be wanting to wear any fine new clothes, she bade me very sharply take shame to myself for an undutiful child! And, holding up her eyes and hands, gave thanks to heaven that none but herself had been by to hear me say that I wouldn't wish to wear a bit of mourning for my own father!

But I tell you all this that you may understand how poor father was in no condition to perplex me with inconvenient questions. And as for stepmother, though she had a good deal of curiosity in her nature, she had yet more caution; and I think that she was afraid to ask me anything lest my answers shouldn't be to her liking, for then how could she have helped it? So she said nothing, which made it easy for me to say the same, and she never blamed me for being mum.

It might have been otherwise with the Usshers, who would have been glad to know that I was doing well for myself, and all about it. But it happened that we didn't see so much of them as formerly, owing to stepmother having had words with Mrs. Ussher, whose youngest but one had tumbled into the pail of pig-wash which stepmother had set out-

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side the door, ready to be carried to the sty. Whereby the child's clothes had been spoiled, as well as our clean doorstone messed up, and the wash wasted, so that each woman considered herself aggrieved and wouldn't apologize to the other. And though I was sorry for their falling out, I yet felt it as well that Mrs. Ussher should have more to say about the cause of it, than to ask about my own affairs; or that stepmother would be sure to find some reason for calling me into the house the minute she heard me pass the time of day with our neighbors over the garden fence.

"But about Betty Castle?" I here suggested, trying to revert to the subject whence we had started.

Margaret's face expressed some distaste of it.

Well, yes, dearie. I said that I met her after my second visit home, didn't I? Which was in April, when the hedgerows and banks were bright with thorn, and primroses, and blue violets, of which I had gathered as many as I could hold, in the lanes about Stadwell. For I thought that they were finer and sweeter there than they could be further from home. But the poor things were wilted and droopy enough, in all conscience, by the time that I had carried them up the Red Hill.

And there I was hurrying, for I had lagged so much at the other end that it was later than it

should have been, and I knew that there would be plenty to be done when I got back. And it seemed like weeks, rather than a bare twenty-four hours, since I had left the farm, so that I was wondering how they all did there, and, above all, whether little Ambrose would show pleasure when I should take him in my arms again.

But as I neared the stile over which Jethro had leaped the first time that I saw him, I was startled there again; and this time it was a voice which broke the thread of my thinking—a woman's voice, coarse and shrill, and raised in anger.

"I tell you I'm going there, and in spite of you! And what have you to say to that?"

There followed a reply, in the deeper tones of a man, the words of which did not reach me. But I thought that it was Jethro who spoke.

He was answered: "Because you're too close fisted, and it isn't worth my while. That's plain truth plainly told, eh? But your stinginess is cutting your own throat, and I have to see whether old master, or young madam, will be wiser."

This time I heard Jethro: "You shall not trouble them!"

In retort, an insolent laugh, which changed into a scream of anger and pain. And when I came abreast of the stile, there was a girl struggling in Jethro's grasp.

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The sight of me brought both to a standstill.
And—

“Who ever’s that?” exclaimed the girl.

Her face was turned to me and I wondered at the strangeness of it. For her black hair fell in greasy rings upon a brow of almost copper-brown, and her eyebrows might have been drawn with charcoal. But the eyes beneath them were the color of skim-milk, which could have passed for blue in a fair face, but in hers looked white, with a sharp, black point in the center of each, which made me think of frog’s spawn. She had fixed them upon me, but I looked at Jethro, who was holding a handkerchief to his lips.

“You are ill?” I cried.

He frowned, shaking his head. Then as I continued to gaze, “Get home! There’s no business of yours here.”

“Who is it?” repeated the girl. And to me:
“Who are you?”

But I gave her no answer, for something in the very sight of her had revolted me, so that I might not speak to her. Yet neither might I leave her. For Jethro had hurt her—I had heard her scream—and it sickened me that any man should do that to any girl. Jethro looked at me over his handkerchief, wondering at my disobedience, till his eyes hardened with a sudden resolve.

"This is Betty Castle," he said to me.

I looked at Betty Castle then, while Betty Castle looked at me. But I had nothing to say about it.

"You saw, not long ago, how your mistress received mention of her," Jethro went on. "Have you a wish that they should meet?"

The answer in my face was enough for him.

"At home with her, then, you may guard against their doing so." To Betty he added, "You will do as you please about forcing yourself upon Mr. Silvester. But I warn you that it will be more to your advantage to deal with me."

I did not wait to hear her answer, before I set off running down the hill to the hollow. And there I found the task which had been set me an easy one. For Mrs. Silvester was in her room with the child when I reached it, and she had so much to complain of in my absence, as well as so many questions to ask concerning it, that I was occupied beyond an hour in listening to her, and answering her, so that there was no fear of her wishing to go beyond the doors. And at the end of that time dusk had fallen, and I heard Jethro come in, after which the house remained still until it was time for me to get the supper.

Jethro was in the parlor, when I entered with

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the tray, and he looked up, quick and straight, at me.

"Does she know?" he asked. And I guessed that he spoke of my mistress, and of his interview with Betty Castle.

"I didn't tell her, sir."

"That was right!"

His eyes dropped to the book which he held, but he fidgeted, and I fancied that he might as well have been looking at it upside down. Presently he spoke again.

"Margaret, you—love your mistress?"

"Yes, sir," I answered quietly, surprised at the sudden question, like none he had ever asked me before, but feeling that protestations in answering it would weigh nothing with him.

"And would help her in any trouble or difficulty? Any danger?"

"If I might!"

"There is"—he was vexing the leaves of the volume in a way which I could stop even then to wonder at, so careful was he in general of his books—"There is a danger which threatens her now, in connection with—the person whom you saw."

The sick feeling which I had experienced before returned upon me.

"Danger—but not to *her*?" I asked incautiously.

"I do not ask you to understand," said Jethro quickly, and I turned away.

"If there were anything to do—for her!" I sighed.

He caught at the murmured words.

"There will be! There may be, when there will be no one else to do it. So shall I count on you?"

I turned again, to look straight at him. "I will serve her with my life while I have it!"

Jethro smiled a little, even while his eyes softened. And I daresay that such words sounded comically enough from my lips, though they might come from my heart.

"And that is a sensible word, Margaret!" he said, forcing himself to speak cheerfully. "And more comfortable to hear than a promise to die for her. Though I doubt whether you have chosen the easiest part."

His smile faded suddenly, and it was with a sigh that he returned to his book, while I slipped away, wondering.

"What was this man?" I asked myself. Up to a certain point, I fancied that I understood him. At any rate I could imagine how such a brooding, melancholy nature might fall, even through a generous impulse, into—I would not soften the word to myself—a crime. But that it should afterward

descend to baseness was a thing which I found altogether beyond belief. And this was not because of any personal feeling of affection for one whom, at the time, truth to tell, I liked very little. But *I knew* that certain sins, and even certain temptations, would be as impossible for his soul to fall into, as certain acts would be impossible to his physical powers. And yet, what danger could threaten Mrs. Silvester, as long as Jethro were not hideously, almost inconceivably base?

So between question and answer my reason was tossed all that evening, and later, when I lay sleepless upon my bed, listening to a murmur of voices most unusual in that grim and silent house. For, Mr. Silvester being that night sober, the two men sat together in the parlor talking, until, at the hour when a new day was born, at last I lost all consciousness in sleep.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE BOAT-HOUSE

JETHRO was looking so ill upon the following morning that my mistress cried out when she saw him.

"Peggy, he should surely go back to bed, instead of out in this cruel wind, against which the very lambs are crying!"

I thought so too, but knew that there was little use in saying so.

"Peggy, do you hear?" Mrs. Silvester went on impatiently, "are you a stock, or dumb? Speak to him, for he will attend to you rather than to any one."

"If I hoped that he would attend, I would speak," I answered, looking at Jethro, who had heard all her talk, of course, being in the room with us, but had given no sign of having done so.

He turned at this, however, and seemed trying to overcome his irritation at having to reply to such foolish chatter of women.

"It is imperative that I go to Ryeworth to-day

on business. Are you wanting anything from the town?"

I shook my head, but the urgency in Mrs. Silvester's gaze compelled me to persist.

"Couldn't John go, sir?"

"John is to go with me," he answered, as he hurried from the room to escape further tormenting.

Mrs. Silvester said nothing more, for her father-in-law just then entered, and his face was like a thundercloud. But, while I trembled to see it, I felt a twinge of pity as well, for the old man was stooping to-day more than ever, it seemed to me, as though beneath an invisible burden that outweighed his strength, and his eyes were haggard from want of sleep.

He came to the breakfast-table scowling, and kicking aside the chairs, according to his usual morning custom, and after incoherent grumblings, while he glared threateningly at my mistress from beneath his heavy brows, he presently spoke to her.

"Have you done?"

She answered timidly that she had, though scarcely a morsel had passed her lips.

"Then can't you go?"

As she immediately obeyed, he looked after her, and I heard him mutter to himself, "There goes ruin!"

Then he turned to his breakfast, but I after-

ward took away almost as much as had been set before him.

I was washing up presently in the kitchen, when I was startled by a lowing close at hand, and, without setting down the cup that I was wiping, I went to look from the door that opened upon the cow-yard. There I saw John Pounce driving out three of our young heifers.

"What are you doing with them?" I asked.

I saw by the set of his jaw that he had no intention of answering me, but just then one of the beasts turned and bolted back to the stalls, while the other two charged through the gate into the open field beyond.

John, pounding out after them, cried to me to head them round, which I did after shutting the yard gate, that number one might not take the opportunity to escape in some other direction meanwhile. And, when we had penned the two in a corner of the field, I brought her along to join them, with my dish-clout tied to her horns, and her heels flying.

"Where's Patch?" I panted. For it was the dog's business to keep cattle together when they were driven, and I thought that he was better fitted for it than I was.

"Must have followed Mr. Jethro and the colt," mumbled John. "Bad luck to him!"

Then he looked round the field, and at the heifers against the hedge, and lastly at me, half surly, half in entreaty.

"You want me to help you?" I asked, seeing that he'd never get out as much for himself.

"Ah!" said John, and he added, "As far as the road. I'll do there. But here, in the open, they'll bolt anyways from a man."

"And what are you to do when you have them in the road?" I asked, recognizing that now I held an advantage over Mr. Pounce, which might even compel an answer to a civil question.

John apparently shared this view of mine, but he scarcely relished it as much as I did, for it was with a wriggle that he replied sulkily, "To Rye-worth."

"What! To market? And is it there that Mr. Jethro has taken the colt?"

"Ah!"

"But I thought that you never sold beasts, save at the fairs?"

"Well, this time, anyhow, we're going to."

"Do you know why?"

I was ashamed even as I asked the question, but the uneasy suspicions which were thickening in my mind drove me to it, and these were not dispelled by John's answer, though I felt that to be a just rebuke.

"I don't need to. It's none of my business."

So then, in silence, I acted dog, keeping the animals for him while he drove them to the gate, and turned their heads down the hill.

"That'll do!" he said, when this had been accomplished, which was all the thanks I got. And I walked back, pondering.

Neither John nor his master returned home until late in the afternoon, and the dog was all that they brought back with them. And upon the next day Jethro seemed almost as bad as ever, and was coughing so that he might scarcely breathe.

On my questioning him he went so far as to admit that he was weary, for that he had slept little during two nights—I could have told him as much!

"I can't help it, Margaret!" he added, looking at me like the boy he should have been, and as if I had chidden him.

It had been far enough from my thought, but, giving the temptation and the opening, I tried my hand at it now.

And first I said severely, though secretly astonished at my own boldness, "I suppose that you can't help gallivanting when the doctor bids you keep your bed? Give me your hand, sir."

He obeyed meekly, but I let it drop immediately, for I had not needed to feel it, to know that he was in a fever.

"Ah, Mr. Jethro!" I said then, for I couldn't meet his look and not be softened, "Won't you hear reason now, and go to bed?"

He shook his head. "If I went to bed now, I should stay there. And I have to be out again at six this evening."

"At six!" I cried, "then not to return till after sundown, in the evening damps! You are mad, after all, then?"

"Don't bother, Margaret!" he said wearily. But I felt that he was wavering, and pushed my advantage.

"It's what I hate to do! And it's not for myself that I ever bother, is it, sir? But 'tis only two days since you asked me what I was willing to do for my mistress. I think of *her*."

Jethro was dumb at the word, his eyes questioning me.

"Yes," I replied to them, and repeated, "*I think of her.*"

Then his lips spoke. "*And I?*"

"If you do," I answered, "your thoughts don't travel far! Have you ever thought what would happen to her, supposing—well, supposing that anything were to happen to you?"

I had said too much now! His face showed me that I had, and it frightened me.

"Forgive me, sir!" I stammered, "I didn't mean it."

"Don't lie, Margaret. You mean it, but there is no forgiveness needed because of that. Could you help thinking it? Or can I? Though it be the thought that kills me!"

For a moment we remained silent, he in meditation, and I afraid to speak. Then, "Her service is worth even living for!" he said. "And I would live, if I could."

I brushed away some tears, and spoke cheerily.

"As you can! And be strong once more, if you will but act for a little while with common sense."

"If I die—" he mused. "No, Margaret, don't shake your head, and grin so at me—it makes you look about as light-hearted as a death's-head! If I die—we must face it squarely——"

"But I can't face it at all!" I blundered, goaded beyond endurance. "For what would become of her then in this dismal place, alone with a fierce old man who hates her—" I was past caring for his frowns now—"and a born idiot, as I believe that Pounce to be, and an ignorant girl, who, however well she may love her, is powerless to help

her at all? While you tell me that she is in danger besides!"

Jethro continued, as calmly as though I had not spoken, which showed that he had force in him yet:

"We must face it. The picture of her surroundings which you draw isn't encouraging, and the worst of it is that it isn't much exaggerated. The question is, may not these surroundings be improved? And, to begin as near home as possible, is it necessary that the powerless, ignorant, but affectionate girl, of whom you speak, should behave like a silly, uncontrolled baby?"

There I was well rebuked, and I confessed it with tears, which threatened to become hysterical when I reflected that I had started this conversation by scolding Jethro! But I checked myself in time, lest he should have better reason to call me uncontrolled.

He went on more lightly:

"However, the common enemy hasn't quite overcome me yet, and I don't intend to leave the field without a stout fight for it! Therefore, as a proof that I will do my best for myself, I will send you out this evening in my place."

I felt my face tingle with sudden excitement. It was like Jethro first to bring me low, and then

to exalt me with a trust above any that had been given me before!

The day seemed long until the evening hour when he had bidden me come to him again, though I scarcely expected pleasure from my charge.

You may believe that I was punctual. But for Jethro, when I presented myself, he seemed to have so little strength at his command that I wondered, if he had insisted upon going himself on his mission, whether he would have had the physical power to carry it out, though it appeared that, after all, the distance to be traveled was but trifling.

"By the boat-house, at the end of the lake," he told me, "at six o'clock, you will meet Betty Castle. Give her this, and tell her that there will be no more for her troubling. But if she remains quiet—we shall see."

I took from his hands a canvas bag, which I felt to be heavy with coin. I suppose that at mention of Betty Castle my face had changed, for he added, almost in apology:

"Pounce is trusty enough, to be sure, but so slow-witted that, if I sent him, he would be certain to make some bungle. Besides, it is an advantage that you are, as you say, ignorant."

"Yes," I was stung to answer with the more bitterness because I felt that on the subject of my

ignorance he was deceived. "And I have heard that dumb messengers are sometimes even safer than trustworthy ones."

Jethro smiled. "You are not jealous of old John, Margaret? Well, as I was going to add, Mr. Silvester could go, but he is easily put out, and there might be trouble if his temper were roused. Besides, what use is it to be angry with a reptile, which is loathsome by nature? So you will go, Margaret, and will not be provoked, nor tempted into an argument. Simply deliver your message, and, when you return, come and tell me how you have fared."

I promised to obey him. But there were difficulties to be encountered even on the threshold, where stood my mistress.

She asked me where I was going with the child? For Jethro had not forbidden me to take him, and I had not known how to leave him behind.

"For a breath of air," I replied. "I have been at work all day, and baby hasn't had his walk."

"Wait a minute, then, and I'll go with you."

Now what excuse could I make against this? God forgive me for the one I used!

"If it wouldn't trouble you, ma'am, I should be easier were you to stay within call of Mr. Jethro——"

The color fled out of her face.

"Peggy, is he ill again? Tell me the truth!"

"No, no, not as he was. But going to the market yesterday has wearied him, so that to-day he is but weakly. Most likely he will sleep. But should he need anything——"

"I'll stay," she said, and thanked me, while I hated myself.

The lake lay two fields off. It was but a large pond where, as I've heard, the monks used to keep their stock of fish for fast-days. Moor-fowl bred now in the sedges that bordered it, and trees clustered thick about the farther end, where a little rustic house had been built to hold a pleasure-boat in days when Silvesters had thought of pleasure.

The boat, however, had long since disappeared, while its former shelter, fallen into decay, was now dropping piecemeal into the water. The land about it, trodden by the beasts that came there to drink, was so boggy that I had to leap from tuft to tuft of coarse grass and rushes to cross it—no light exercise with little Ambrose in my arms. And, the sun being low, an unwholesome mist, hanging about the wood and water, made me regret that I had not, after all, left the child at home with his mother.

Moreover, while I looked anxiously for Betty Castle, I could perceive no sign of her where even

her presence would have been a relief, I thought, in the chill lonesomeness of that dismal place. Yet, when at length I did catch sight of her, my feelings underwent such a rapid change that I was tempted to wish her away again. For within the boat-house, and flattened against the wall just inside the door, where there was barely room to stand without toppling into the water that sucked the timbers beneath, she appeared too like some unclean shadow haunting the spot for the sight of her to be either welcome or reassuring to me.

She chuckled at the start which I could not conceal. But I wasted no words upon explanation or greeting.

"I have a message from Mr. Jethro Silvester for you," I began. "Will you come out here, where I can give it?"

"Why didn't he come?" she asked suspiciously.

I did not choose to tell her that he was too ill, so answered shortly, "It wasn't convenient," at which she chuckled again.

"Then is nobody else with you?" she inquired next.

I told her that I had brought the baby.

"What for?" she asked crossly. But, as she spoke, she emerged into the light. And we stood there together in the ooze, looking at one another.

To lose no further time, I put the bag into her hand. Her eyes gleamed as she received it, but—"Was this all?" she demanded.

"There will be no more for your troubling," I replied, according to my instructions. "But if you remain quiet—they will see."

"Was that a message?"

I bent my head.

"I needn't have asked," she retorted contemptuously. "Jethro is *such* a fool! Tell him I won't fail to let him know as soon as more is wanted."

She stood, weighing the bag in her hands, while she regarded me with those queer eyes of hers.

"Do you know?" she then asked suddenly, "do you know how I have earned this?"

I answered rudely that I did not wish to know that, or anything else that she could tell me.

All at once she bent forward, snatching at the shawl in which the child was wrapped.

I shrank back, and she laughed at me, but there was a strange ring in her laughter.

"What are you afraid of? Is he too beautiful for me to see? Ah! and his mother dotes on him, doesn't she? You should have seen how she doted on his father!"

Her words, for no reason, made my flesh creep, and I shivered.

"It's time for me to be going home. The sun is down," I murmured, wrapping baby closer.

"Nay, what a hurry to be in! And I had so much to ask about the family. Is Mr. Silvester well? Such a kind, mild-mannered old gentleman as he always was! And the lady? Isn't she a sweet young lady? And so domestic!"

"Good evening to you!"

"Well, but stay! Did you ever know any one so merry and full of fun as Mr. Jethro? Keeps the house alive, doesn't he?"

I was wriggling like a worm on a hook, and her eyes danced, to see how uncomfortable she could make me.

"You won't forget to give them all my humble duty and thanks? And"—condescendingly—"I'm sure I shall always be pleased to see you, whenever they send you to me on an errand like this. Mind and tell them so; for I'm glad to be of any service to them, though sorry that, being but a poor girl, I can't afford to do that, or anything else, for nothing."

She let me go at last. And I, jumping back over the tussocks, faster than I had come, was annoyed to find that my teeth were chattering in my head. But this, I tried to think, must be because of the chill that arose from the water and the damp, low-lying land. And, the better to deceive

myself, I wrapped his shawl so closely about little Ambrose's limbs, that he, fretting against the restraint of it, scolded me soundly in the language that needed no words to express his meaning, while he kicked and struggled to be free.

CHAPTER XVIII

BETTY CASTLE, ACCORDING TO MRS. JANAWAY

It here came into my head to inquire of Margaret whether she had ever seen again the worthy, gossiping woman who had befriended her upon the day when she had arrived, a stranger, tramping up hill to Sacrilege Farm?

Well, she replied, it's funny that you should think to ask me that just now! For I never did happen upon a sight of her again, until about a fortnight after I had met Betty Castle at the boat-house, and when I did it was of Betty that we talked. For Mrs. Janaway was as gossipy as ever.

I had been down to Ryeworth myself for once, not trusting John, to buy material for frocks for little Ambrose, who outgrew his things almost as fast as they could be made for him, and would roll and drag himself along on the floor now, in a way which it made me proud to watch—for it showed what strength the little monkey had—but was certainly hard upon his clothes.

And I was walking up again, half-pleased, half-ashamed of my extravagance, for I had gone to the

expense of some fine white cut-work for trimmings, when I found that I was once more overtaking the light cart, with the name, *T. Janaway*, painted in white upon the back of it, and that it had, as before, a chestnut horse between its shafts, and a stout woman in a black bonnet to hold the reins.

As before, too, it was traveling so slowly up the hill that it needed no hurry on my part to come up with it, but some ado to keep behind; so that I gave it up at last, and tried to hasten by with a dropped curtsey. But at that Mrs. Janaway, who had recognized me, called to me to walk with her, which I might scarcely refuse to do.

"And so," she cried, "it's you! And they've not swallowed you up yet? It's often that I've wondered what has become of you. And how are you getting on this long time?"

I told her nicely. But her eye was so sharp upon me that I had to drag my own up to meet it.

"I've looked out many a time upon the road for you," she told me. "But you were like all those who go to Sacrilege Farm—lost and buried, as if you'd stepped into one of the graves in the churchyard down there."

I laughed. "But I've been alive all the time, ma'am, and lively too! Only too busy to be often on the road."

"Yes," she answered. "There's more to do there now than you bargained for, I daresay. We heard of the birth of the child. Poor girl! For, when all's said and done, I must pity her."

"It's a boy," I explained, not too careful to take her meaning. "And a beauty," I added proudly.

"Ah! And a comfort to his mother, I have no doubt?"

"Y—yes," I answered, consoling my conscience with the consideration that it would have been as false to have said *no*.

She turned briskly round on me.

"Well, you've had time to prove the truth of all that I told you once! And are you going to say to me now that things are just as they should be in that house?"

Taken sore aback by the suddenness of her assault, I felt myself blushing scarlet while I hesitated.

"Of course Mrs. Silvester is often sad, though I've seen her merry too. And Mr. Silvester is easily provoked and not always himself," I admitted at last, reflecting that I was telling her no more than she had already told me.

"And poor Ambrose? Have you heard aught about him?"

"Yes," I answered, trying to be bold, though my heart was galloping. "And I have seen the room where *he was burned*."

As I spoke the last words slowly, I managed to look in her face.

Her lip lifted. If she had been less good-hearted she would have sneered.

"Ah! They took care to show you that?"

"No," I replied, gaining courage, for the truth of what I spoke now supported me. "I was not intended to see it at all. But one day I blundered in there——"

She did not wait to hear me out before she attacked me from another quarter.

"And can you tell me where it is that Betty Castle has got all the fine clothes she's flaunting in now? For she came home in rags from wherever she's been, which she says was service—pretty service! Or how is it that, while her father's tools are rusting, her little brothers and sisters don't have to cry for their bread?"

The unexpectedness of such questions shook me so grievously that I had to pull myself together to ask in my turn, more in desperation than out of impudence, what she imagined I had to do with Betty Castle and her fine clothes, or with the affairs of her family either?

"You've never seen Betty Castle, I suppose?"

inquired Mrs. Janaway, her eyes boring into me like gimlets.

I was silent, longing for the gate where Chestnut would turn, when, to my dismay, Mrs. Janaway took me by the shoulders and spoke solemnly, and, as I must believe, with good intention.

"Child, however you may be trying to hide it, even from yourself, believe me, you are mixed up in a bad business there. Be careful how you go. I can't think but, with that face, you are innocent. But how long will you be so if you don't remember that to help wrong is to do it?"

Her manner frightened me even more than her words. But I tried to stand unmoved.

"I shall help no wrong," I declared stoutly, "while I serve my mistress well."

"Ah!" groaned Mrs. Janaway, shaking her head.

I felt a distinct pleasure in being able to lose my temper with her. For it was a relief to know that, on this subject at any rate, I need not remain on the defensive.

"Well?" I demanded fiercely. "And have you anything to say against her? If so, it will be a new thing since I saw you before!"

She reddened. But it was mildly enough that she replied: "True; I had seen less then. And, God knows, I pity her still."

I tossed my head.

"Really, ma'am, you are very kind!"

"Well," she retorted, nettled at last, "I have warned you for your good. What is it to me? But, for your own soul and body's sake, I warn you again to be careful. For it would be no pretty discovery for a girl like you one day to find herself made partner in a crime!"

I declared, with red-hot cheeks, that no such prospect should alarm me, were my mistress to be of the partnership. I would not forgive Mrs. Jana-way her manner in alluding to her. For had I not to keep up my courage? And this I found it easiest to do when I was in a passion.

But the farmer's wife was a good-hearted woman, as I've said, and she set me an example in forbearance, as she remarked, with more regret than anger in her tone:

"Ah, my dear, I'm afraid you're one who can be blinded by kindness. And no doubt they've been kind to you. It's their way. See how they are with Betty Castle!"

I stopped dead, speechless, choking. That I should be classed with Betty Castle!

My stricken look must have touched Mrs. Jana-way, who hastened to add:

"Oh, no doubt there's a difference. For your conscience may be but deceived, while hers, if ever

she had one, must be worn out by this time. But it won't be enough to have a different motive from hers, if your action is the same in assisting crime against justice."

I sought desperately for a way to stop her mouth.

"Mrs. Janaway—" I began.

"Well?" she replied encouragingly, while I could almost see her ears prick up with eagerness to receive something which she imagined I was making up my mind to tell.

"I understand you," I went on. "You think that Betty Castle is being paid to hold her tongue. I remember how once before you hinted that she might know more of the manner of Ambrose Silvester's death than his relations would care to have told."

She nodded impatiently, her eyes brightening, and I had to force myself to continue, for I was now talking of something about which, up to this hour, I had hated even to think, and my own words seemed to leave a bad taste in my mouth as I uttered them.

"Well, *why* are you so sure that this explains the things you see? Do you not remember telling me, at the same time, of talk there was about something which had been between the girl and the dead man? And might it not be because of *that*

that his friends are paying her—if they do pay her, after all?” I ended hastily, afraid of having admitted too much.

Mrs. Janaway looked down into the dust which she was prodding with the point of her umbrella, as she trudged beside the cart. Somehow the idea did not seem pleasing to her. But she was unable to say that there was no likelihood in it. As for me, now that I had had the courage to put it into words, it satisfied me so well that I was almost inclined to place some faith in it myself.

“Well,” remarked the good woman at last, “explain it so to yourself, if you please. But don’t be wilfully blind, nor refuse a test if I offer you one. If it be as you think, the family conscience should surely be lightened now—and I find it hard to believe that the conscience of Cornelius Silvester could ever have been troubled at all for such a thing. But Betty, at the rate she’s spending now, will soon have spent everything she can have got from them yet. And, if she gets more after that, I, for one, shan’t know how she does it, if it’s not by *blackmail*.”

I had nothing to say to this.

“Meanwhile,” she added, “the Silvesters would do well to be on their guard.”

“Against what?” I asked apprehensively, for

we lived so out of the world that I felt sure that the Silvesters would be the last to hear rumors of danger to themselves.

“Against the talk which says that Jethro is selling his beasts when nobody is buying, for anything that they’ll fetch now, rather than wait till he may get a proper price for them at the fairs—which looks as if he were in a strait for ready money. And that no sooner has he sold any than this trapesing gipsy decks herself with feathers and ribbons that would disgrace an honest girl; and Castle gives up his job, and takes to the public-house instead, and the neighbors smell meat for dinner there every day. That’s what is said, and, if I was the Silvesters, I wouldn’t let it be said too often!”

I tried to collect my thoughts, but they were in such a whirl, that I think of nothing but Betty’s strange dark face and light eyes, and so I asked idly—“Is she a gipsy, then?”—as if I cared!

“Nay, but there’s gipsy blood in her. For her mother was a road-girl, tramping the country with baskets and brooms to sell, and we call such gipsies, though I’ve heard that the Romanys themselves won’t own them for kin. She married a laboring man of our parts, and I believe there’s little harm in her now, though

she was wild as a hawk once, before a hard husband and ten children had tamed her. Betty's her eldest, and has her black face, with her father's features in it, and nothing has tamed *her* yet."

While Mrs. Janaway talked, I had leisure to grow calmer, and by the time she had ended, we were at the gate where Chestnut, unbidden, turned in, and I paused to take my leave.

And first I thanked Mrs. Janaway humbly for her kind interest in my welfare, before I added, as indifferently as I could, that it would be a bad thing for the Castles should they accustom themselves to a life of idleness and luxury which they would not be able to afford after Betty's money was spent.

"And a worse thing for the Silvesters, if they have to keep the Castles in idleness and luxury. For they won't be long in finding out that the more such leeches get, the more will they suck!" retorted Mrs. Janaway, as she climbed into the cart, and chirruped to Chestnut.

But I would not let my thoughts dwell upon my dismal forebodings. For, after all, what use is there in meeting troubles half way? So it was of little Ambrose, and of the cut of his new garments, that I was resolutely thinking when I reached the yard gate, through which Patch, with every hair

bristling, stalked to greet me with the growl where-with it was still his habit to protest against my presence in a place where he would not yet allow himself to imagine that I could be on any lawful business.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW A VISITOR CAME AT MIDNIGHT TO THE FARM

As the weather warmed (Margaret continued), we thought that Jethro's cough troubled him less. But I can see now that his weakness was growing upon him through the whole of that time, though there were days when he seemed so well that we were then deluded enough to imagine that the summer might work his cure.

Instead of which, when summer came, the heat only tried his strength, till his weariness was as piteous to look upon as pain.

He never let us speak if it, however, and he never complained, and I daresay that the gnawing care and anxiety, which now he was never without, were in truth wearing him out quicker than the hot weather, or his disease either.

But even worse to see than his suffering, were Mrs. Silvester's dread and her despair. For on Jethro's bad days her eyes would be dark with a fear of which she could not speak, though, when I was alone, she would sometimes come to me, to weep without a word, in a way which broke my

heart, or perhaps to storm in anger as helpless as her grief because I could not make him well.

"And did Mr. Silvester see it?" I inquired.
"And did he care?"

It would be hard to say just how much Mr. Silvester saw or felt. For he scarcely took notice of any of us by so much as a look, unless it was his grandson, whom he watched with a close attention that wasn't exactly affectionate, but certainly betrayed something of an interest in his welfare. He drank less in these days too, and minded the farm more. So that, seeing no more for some time of either Betty Castle or Mrs. Janaway, I began to be easier in my mind on several accounts.

But presently this state of affairs, which, after all that had gone before, I was inclined to look upon as peace, was all at once rudely disturbed.

It had been a more than usually hot day, and the night after it was sultry and close. I was uneasy about Jethro, who had been unable to conceal his languor, and I suppose that this, with the heat, made it impossible for me to rest. So, near twelve o'clock, which was truly the middle of the night with us early folk, I rose, and crept to his door to listen.

I have not told you that, against the wishes of all of us, he had insisted on keeping the dark little lumber-room at the head of the stairs for himself,

and on making me occupy, with the child, his larger and more airy chamber on the other side of the house.

Well, there was no sound to be heard there, save the regular breathing which told that Jethro was quietly asleep, and so, returning, I had prepared myself to lie down again beside baby, when pit-pat came Mrs. Silvester's little slippered feet along the passage, and her anxious face appeared, unearthly white in the ray of moonlight that crossed the room.

"Peggy," she said, "I thought that I heard you stirring. Is all well?"

"All," I told her, adding that I had but been to make sure that Mr. Jethro slept.

She sighed, comforted, but seemed loath to go away just yet.

"It's so hot, Peggy!" she complained. "Will you not let me sit for a little while in the moonlight by your window? There is a tiny breeze here, I think, which doesn't reach my corner of the house."

Of course I made her welcome to do as she pleased, though I saw that she was just restless, and that it was only her fancy about the breeze.

She told me to go to sleep if I could, promising not to disturb me, and I was just dropping off, when her voice, in a scared undertone, roused me

again: "Peggy! Somebody is throwing stones at the window!"

I was on my elbow in an instant, listening, though I could scarce believe her—for who was there to throw stones? A cloud was upon the moon, but in the darkness I might distinguish her white gown, in the corner whence she had shrunk from the casement.

"Don't call it *nonsense*, Peggy," she pleaded, though I had called it nothing at all, "for I did hear a step, and I heard—*there!*"

Sure enough a little gravel stone clinked against the pane, while another swished into the ivy beside it on the wall.

I jumped out of bed. If I must tell the truth, my knees were almost too weak to bear me. But Mrs. Silvester was not to know that I was afraid!

She caught hold of me. "Don't look out! You don't know what it may be!"

"Well," I answered, with a great show of resolve, "that is just what I am going to find out!"

"Wait—oh, listen!"

For now a voice was to be heard, harsh, but subdued to hoarseness, which called, "Jethro Silvester! Jethro Silvester!"

In spite of the little fingers which tightened their clasp upon me, I went to the window then, and peered out.

My form was apparently seen, though not recognized in the dull, clouded light. And I, on my part, saw nothing to recognize in a black shadow upon the grass beneath.

"You sleep sound!" it said. "An easy conscience, I suppose?"

I made no reply, which caused the voice to continue tauntingly:

"Are you sulky, then? Nay, but be just! For what could I do? You had charged me never to show myself in this place, and you never went elsewhere where you might have been met, and so I come at an hour when I shall not be seen. You should praise me for that!"

"Peggy, where's your cloak?"

The question startled me as if a bell had been struck at my ear. For, although it was uttered low, the tone of the questioner was hard and sharp. I turned.

"What do you want with my cloak, ma'am?"

"Never mind! Give it me quick, or must I fetch my own?"

In silence I brought it to her, trembling for fear of what might come, but powerless to resist it. The voice in the garden was hushed meanwhile, but, as Mrs. Silvester covered her thin nightdress, she signed to me to creep back to the window to show my head at it as before, and, as soon as I had

done so, the voice broke out once more, this time in complaint.

"What are you doing there again? I thought that you were coming down. I want to talk to you, and I suppose you'd sooner I didn't shout?"

I shook my head.

"But I'm bound to say my say! I've spent every penny, or others have for me, and you don't think that I am paid yet, do you? When shall I touch more of that which I'm earning every day? Deny it if you dare!"

Still I was silent, and for good reason. But my silence seemed to be exasperating. For the next utterance from without was a threat.

"I can get from others, remember, if I can't from you! If a hint is dropped, as I know how it may be, the whole affair will be brought up again. For crowner or no crowner, there are few now who feel satisfied. And after that I need only wait till the reward they offer shall be big enough for my taking."

I was shaking while I listened, but all at once I saw something to stop such foolish tremors and send me flying within, to snatch up what garments I might huddle upon me on the instant. For I had not heard Mrs. Silvester leave the room before I saw her there, in my long, coarse cloak, stepping

erect across the grass toward the speaker, who uttered a smothered exclamation.

It seemed an age of senseless dread, though it could have been but a very few moments, before I was myself out, running to where they stood, not now upon the open lawn, but within the shelter of the garden wall, where the hanging ivy cast a black shadow. For the cloud had passed, leaving the moon again at her brightest.

At my approach, Betty Castle, as I had guessed our visitor to be, broke off from some other speech to curse my presence.

"How many more?" she demanded, with an angry sneer.

Mrs. Silvester took no notice of the words, nor of me, as she said to the girl very low, but with a haughty anger of which I should scarcely have believed her capable:

"I am waiting to know why you came?"

Before her wrath Betty cowered, in spite of the impudence which, however, did not quite desert her.

"I told you—to see Jethro Silvester."

"I must know what you want with him?"

"You may ask him then, if you don't know, and aren't afraid to know!" retorted Betty.

Her tone to my mistress sent the blood to my

head, and I leaped at her. But Mrs. Silvester laid her hand upon me.

"Peggy, don't be a fool! Ah!"—in a voice of such passion as I knew that women sometimes feel, but had not expected to meet in her—"I should need no aid to crush her like a worm!"

Betty looked uncertainly behind her, as though to seek for a way of escape there, and my mistress went on, smothering the white flame of her wrath in contempt:

"See her! And yet she knows that she must be safe from me. *Do you know it? Do you?*"

She bent her white face, with its burning eyes, close to that of the girl, who shrank away as if indeed scorched, while she plucked nervously at the ivy trails.

Mrs. Silvester laughed low, and replied to her movement as if it had been speech.

"Perhaps you are right. It might not be wise to tempt even me too far. And now"—in her former tone of cold determination—"why are you here?"

Betty seemed to be addressing me, sulkily:

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell her, as she sees me here?"

"That is well," my mistress responded coolly, "because I mean to know!"

"Well, then, for my money."

"Who was to give you money?"

"Jethro Silvester."

"And for what?"

With the chance to wound, Betty turned.

"Nay, you *must* know that!"

I saw that Mrs. Silvester was shaken. She turned on me in an agony of impatience.

"Peggy, who told *you* to be here? Go back immediately to the house."

I stood like a block.

"Peggy!"

"I can't help it, ma'am," I said. "There are things I can't do, and this is one of them."

It was perfectly true. To leave her alone with that creature in the night would have been as impossible for me as to fly away from them on wings.

Betty's quick eyes were busy taking in this and that, while my mistress, who knew when she was beaten, stood irresolutely tapping her foot upon the ground. At last she spoke:

"How much were you to have?"

Betty was searching for an answer, when I interrupted:

"Excuse me, ma'am! I shall be surprised if she is able to tell you that she was expecting anything. Won't you leave me to speak to her?"

"Certainly not, Peggy! You astonish me with your interference."

It was pitiful to see her trying to lay the cause of her agitation at the door of her offended dignity, for which I suspect at the moment she cared as little as she did for mine. Betty, perceiving this too, laughed coarsely.

"She knows more than you guess, Mrs. Ambrose Silvester! She and I have met before this."

My poor mistress made a quick, despairing motion with her hands, which put me in mind of the whirling struggle of a fly that feels the web about her. And I, sore with pity for her bewilderment, thought fit to speak out.

"That is true, ma'am, and yet I know little of her, except that I was once sent to her with a message, which I didn't try to understand. But part of it, as I remember, though she seems to have forgotten it, was that she would gain most by keeping quiet, and giving no trouble."

"And haven't I kept quiet?" demanded Betty. "That was back in the spring, and I've kept so quiet since, that it seems I've been forgotten."

"What?" cried Mrs. Silvester, and her voice was faint and shrill. "In the spring? You were tormenting them so long ago, and I did not know it! And yet, I did know that you had returned, although you promised once that you would never do so——"

Betty grinned. "I was home-sick, you see. And I thought, if I did break my promise, and come home, there was no law that could touch me for it."

My mistress moaned. "Is there to be *no end?*"

The other felt that she had better not urge her too far toward despair.

"Nay, I never said so. The truth is, I've been unfortunate, and couldn't keep what I had. Better luck next time, say I! Shall we try it once more?"

Any one else would have melted at the expression on Mrs. Silvester's face, as she faltered:

"It is so little that I have!"

"But," replied Betty, encouragingly, "it is so little that I want! Only enough to take me away again from here, where they won't let me work honestly for my bread——"

My mistress covered her face, and I broke in:

"Don't trust her, ma'am! She'll take all that you can give her, and then go to Mr. Jethro for more."

"That I won't, I swear!" cried Betty, with a scowl at me, and a sidle up to my mistress.

The latter looked up.

"Peggy, run and fetch the little inlaid box from my table."

"Don't!" I besought her, struggling with my sobs. "Your little treasures—all that you have of your own! It will be no use, I tell you! You don't know how false, and cruel, and greedy such things are," pointing to Betty.

Mrs. Silvester couldn't be angry with my obstinacy, as she looked upon my tears. She tried to explain gently, though her words racked me:

"You don't understand, Peggy—even you can not understand at all! I must give my share, because—it will make me less miserable to do it. Run then, dear, good Peggy, and help me to be less miserable!"

And so, unconvinced indeed, but because I was unable to withstand her pleading, I did run, though my feet were like lead.

When I returned, they were standing as before within the shadow of the ivy, and I don't think that one had moved, or spoken to the other, while I had been gone.

My mistress took the box which I brought her, and which was unlocked, for, as I have said, she was never careful of what belonged to her, and opened it. And first she put into Betty's hand, which trembled, whether from shame or greed, a gold "Faith, Hope, and Charity," given her when a child by her godmother. You see I knew the history of each of these trinkets, which were precious

to her as tokens of the kindness of lost friends, for she had related them to me often as we had sat together through long evenings, fingering them beside winter fires. And it cut me to the heart to see them now, defiled, as it seemed to me, by the gipsy's touch.

But Mrs. Silvester, for her part, seemed never to regret them, as eagerly she gave them, till Betty's hands were full, and the box empty, save for the locks of her parents' hair which she had taken from a locket. I burst out crying.

"Peggy dear, don't be stupid," my mistress then entreated me, with a little tremble, however, in her own voice. "After all, these are but *things*, which I have not loved for themselves. But, if I had, I would give them all gladly, and twice as many, if I might!"

Betty slowly handed back a pretty miniature of two children's heads—her sisters as Mrs. Silvester had told me—the back of which was of worked gold.

"This is no good to me," she said gruffly. "You could give me the chain on which you wear the other, instead."

"The other?" faltered my mistress.

"The picture of your husband," Betty explained bluntly, "with the long gold chain."

I felt the kind hand, which in my distress Mrs.

Silvester had laid upon my shoulder, turn cold and tremble.

"I haven't got it," she said shortly.

"Not the picture," the creature explained laboriously, and I wondered if she shuddered a little as she said it, "only the chain."

"I tell you I haven't got it," my mistress repeated, her voice cracking as it rose.

"Oh, well," Betty replied sullenly, "how was I to know? You used never to be without it."

It was evident that Mrs. Silvester was not believed, and, as the other turned away, the longing which I had had to see her go, was swallowed up in a wave of anger and loathing, and I sprang after her.

"If Jethro Silvester hears of this," I whispered in her ear, "he'll find a way to make you pay for it!"

She faced me. Her eyes, in the moonlight, looked as clear and colorless as water.

"Jethro Silvester would know better than to try!" she returned with rough contempt. "But your mistress has spoken one true word—*You don't understand at all*—and, if you say your prayers before you go to sleep, pray that you never may!"

CHAPTER XX

JETHRO

AFTER that night troubles seemed to thicken. First, there was a fresh one from outside, of which I must tell you in its proper place. And then there was that of Jethro's increasing illness, which was what we had to think about most, for it was the most urgent. But worse to me was the trouble which I bore with me all the time hidden in my heart, and prayed to be delivered from, while I dared not speak its name even to the God who made me! I tell you that between horror and pity, doubt and nameless dread, I believe that it was only Jethro's sufferings, and baby's needs, and the necessity there was to attend to both, that kept me in my right senses at all.

But Jethro was now growing worse so rapidly that we could no longer blind our eyes to the fact that his illness could only end in one way. And more than once I thought that if he wished, as he had once hinted that he might, to share the burden which was breaking his soul and body, with another, who might bear it after he had laid it down,

I should encourage him to do so while there was time.

But when it came to the point I found myself powerless to speak. Partly because it seemed a cruel, ghoulisn thing to harry the lad to his grave by being overcareful to point the way there, and partly because I thought that I knew already, and too well, all that he could say to me; and the prospect of hearing it from his lips contained nothing for either of us but heart-sickness and shame.

“Then”—I here questioned Margaret—
“Jethro did not himself recognize that his days were numbered?”

No; which I have since observed is often the case with one ill as he was. But at that time I used to wonder that the change in him was not a plainer warning to himself. For now he possessed scarcely more strength than a babe, and it was out of the question for him to spend an hour in such work upon the farm as, but a few months before, he would have been engaged in from morning till night. Besides which he was constantly in the fever which none of the doctor’s stuffs seemed able to allay.

The good old man, in spite of his huffy words in the spring, would come now and again to see him, without being called. But as his presence seemed only to weary Jethro, as well as to irritate his

uncle, while it could do little to help, he made his visits as few and as short as possible, leaving me to carry out, as best I might, the instructions which he gave.

But, in speaking of the alteration in his bodily powers, I must tell you that, though this was great, I was less struck by it than by other changes in Jethro's self. For although he might not realize the approach of death, seeming indeed to dwell upon the thought of it less at the end than at the beginning of his illness, still he was surely learning to let life go.

Perhaps it was increasing weakness which made it easy for him now to sit quietly in his chair in the cool parlor, or beneath the flickering green fans of the tulip tree, leaving his uncle and John Pounce to do anyhow the work about which he used to be so eager and so particular. And it may have been the same languor which altered him with regard to Mrs. Silvester. For there had been a time when the sound of her voice without, or a movement of hers while we sat together at one of our silent meals, had been enough to set the red flag flying in his face, and his hands atremble, even though his eyes had fled from hers, and his feet too, if they might.

But now that hot leap of the blood toward her, and the cold fear of her which had seemed to fol-

low it, had vanished altogether, and his eyes would rest upon her with a contentment in which there was no self-consciousness with its heat and cold.

But as for her, I could not tell whether it were pleasure or pain which caused her so to start and flush whenever he turned to demand from her one of those little services which she had by degrees dropped into the habit of rendering him, though with a rapturous timidity that seemed to grow upon her as his own ease and confidence in her presence increased.

One burning day in September—the summer that year being as loath to go as the spring had been to come—the doctor came to pay Jethro a visit. And when he had taken his leave of him he beckoned me apart.

“If this weather lasts it will finish it,” he said to me.

“Ah!” I answered quietly, for when sorest hit one makes least outcry. But still I looked for some hope where I knew that there was none. And so I added: “But if the weather were to change?”

“A dry, yet fresh and vigorous autumn might carry him—as far as the winter.”

And I asked no more.

The doctor, glancing at me, began again: “I don’t understand these people, nor their relations

to one another—that hasn't been my business. I don't know how much they realize of the young man's danger, nor whether there is any necessity that they should realize it at all. If you think that there is, you had better see to it."

He went away. And I leaned against the porch, and laughed under my breath, because I was near the end of my strength and my wits, and didn't dare to cry. And while I was laughing Mrs. Silvester stepped into the porch beside me.

"What is the joke, Peggy?" she asked.

I shook my head, stupidly staring at the rusty weather-cock on the old square tower in front of me, and at the parched fields, where the cows were growing thin, out beyond, and at the sky above it, cloudless, yet thick, as if with the labored breath of the exhausted earth. The weather would not change!

"You don't look like a particularly giddy Peg-top," my mistress mused, observing me.

"No," I replied, and added, "and I don't feel like one."

"Was it something which the doctor said to you?" she persisted.

"Oh," I returned, almost crossly, "I don't know! If it was, I think that I must be going off my head!"

"My poor Peggy, you are worn out, and no wonder! We all live upon your strength."

"Don't speak kindly!" I told her fiercely. "I—I don't *want* to cry!"

"Peggy," she whispered, "the doctor has told you that Jethro is to die!"

I stood back from her, staring amazed at her tone, and at her look. For where I had dreaded to meet with a frantic sorrow, I saw a gleam of tremulous, eager hope!

"Peggy, Peggy," she pressed me, as I did not speak, "does he think that it will be *soon*?"

"Do you want it to be soon?" I demanded bluntly in my turn, too much astonished to be able to pick my words.

As she looked away, she raised one hand to her throat where something was working, and her face was a martyr's face, tortured and triumphant, when she answered:

"Yes! I love him—enough for that!"

I stood silent, remembering that after the night in which Betty Castle had visited us—which subject had never been mentioned by either of us since—there had been a difference in Mrs. Silvester where Jethro was concerned. For, while she had been devoted in her efforts to relieve his sufferings, she had at the time ceased to rebel against them, never weeping, nor praying me to do something

—anything—to save him; nor flying out against me and the doctor because, with all our striving, there was nothing that could be done; nor insisting upon remedies which would have been worse than useless, and to which Jethro would never have submitted. And now here she was with the first light which I had seen for long brightening her eyes, as she demanded of me whether he was soon to die!

For answer I told her exactly what the doctor had said, and her brow became clouded with care.

“Till winter?” she murmured. “Three long months, in which so many things might happen! But”—looking round her, as I had done, on sky and land, and drawing, as I had done, conclusions from what she saw—“the weather is going to hold, Peggy. And so, before winter, he will be *safe!*”

And with that she turned and went indoors, with her head up, and a buoyant step.

But when I followed her into the room where Jethro was sitting in the arm-chair asleep, the doctor's examination having exhausted him, I saw that already her mood was changed. And, indeed, I myself was startled by the unearthliness of his look at rest, the sight of which seemed to have gripped my mistress by the throat, so that she had to choke down a storm of sudden weeping before she could whisper hoarsely to me:

"Peggy, Peggy, Peggy, what have I done? Was *this* the only way in which he might be saved from my sin?"

"Hush!" I warned her.

But it was too late. For Jethro had opened his eyes upon her, and trouble immediately leaped into them.

"What is it?" he asked. "What ails her?"

She came running back—for she had tried to creep away—and knelt beside him, with streaming eyes.

"Nothing, Jethro, nothing! But—you have forbidden me to speak of it——"

"Nay," he replied wearily. "All's done, so why speak, or think of it? All's done. You should not cry."

"Yes, all's done—all!" she repeated despairingly. "And anything that comes after comes too late! Life itself is nearly done, and your life is ruined for me!"

He looked pained, and as puzzled as a child confronted with grief, while she sobbed still:

"My fault! If I had been more patient—one can always bear a little more—if I had! Jethro, could you curse me now? Ah, never forgive me, for if you do, you'll break my heart!"

"How should I forgive you?" he asked, the flush on his cheek deepening from uneasy excite-

ment. "It was because I was powerless to forgive that I have rejoiced in bearing some small part of your punishment, though that may not be lessened. And because I have no comfort to offer you, that I have begged you not to speak of this."

Then his own words, gently as they had been uttered, seemed to strike him as hard, and he put his hand to rest upon the brown head bowed at his knee.

"Poor child!" he said, "who knows? If suffering is indeed but comfort in disguise, we shall one day recognize it, and be comforted. For we have suffered, you and I."

She looked up, with a white face.

"But Jethro—they say—good people say—that there will be worse suffering to come. Ah, God, if it be so, let me bear that alone!"

He laughed out, while his hand caressed her hair.

"Good people? What can good people know about it, or what can their opinion be worth? Ask the *bad* people—when they know!"

I was terribly shocked, both at hearing what to my small intelligence seemed like impious talk from the lips of a dying man, and, as a nurse, at seeing one so exercised. And I spoke firmly to Mrs. Silvester.

“You must come away, ma’am, if you can’t control yourself.”

So she came like a lamb, for her tears would not cease running. But as for Jethro, he had scarce had time to sigh before he was off to sleep again, and the lips to which my narrow thinking had but now uttered a blasphemy, parted happily, in the smile of an infant at rest.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW MARGARET WENT GATHERING MUSHROOMS

"You said," I reminded Margaret, who seemed to have forgotten it, "that you would tell me presently of some new fear which assailed you from outside."

Yes (she answered). And I will, though I can't remember exactly when it was that I first became conscious of it. But I think that it must have been upon an evening when, on my way to fetch the cows into the milking—John and his master being occupied elsewhere, and we all doing one another's work higgledy-piggledy just then, because of Jethro's being laid aside—I came upon a stranger man, decently dressed, who was hanging over the gate of one of the pastures.

I could have sworn that, before he saw me, he had been writing or drawing something in a little book, which, however, was nowhere to be seen by the time that I got up to him, when he was doing nothing but bite his nails, with his face turned from me, while he hummed an idle tune.

He made way civilly for me to pass, though he

didn't speak, nor look round, as he did so, and when I came back with the cows he was gone. But I marked then, above me, where the fields joined the road on the crest of the hill, two black figures against the sky. And one of them I knew was the village constable from Ryeworth, while the other may, or may not, have been the stranger man whose face I had not seen.

And after this there came one day to the door a dusty wayfarer, whose clothes were coarser than his speech, or his hands either, inquiring of me the way to Budhampton, which he had missed, he said, through trying to take a shorter cut across our land.

Yet, when I had set him on the road, he would not immediately follow it, begging of me first a drink of water, which I gave him. But he didn't seem so thirsty after all, for he sipped, rather than drank, while, with his eyes all over the place, he asked me a score of questions, showing that already he knew more about my masters than their names.

It was but little, however, that he got out of me, and when at last he tried to press a piece of money into my hand—which I kept as flat and stiff at my side as if I had been a soldier at *attention*—I told him that it was too much for a drink of water, but that the master might not consider it enough compensation for a trespass, so that he'd

better be stepping before he came in, unless he had a very particular reason for wishing to meet with him. And he took the hint.

This it was which worried me, as I've told you, for I couldn't think who the two strangers—if they were two—might be, nor what motive they might have for hanging round the place, and seeking information about its owners from the hired servants upon it. Nor whether it was one of them whom I had seen in company with the constable—nor indeed, what business, or chance, had served to bring *him* about. But before long I was able to make a guess upon each of these subjects, and little was the comfort to be got from that!

At this time Jethro had many whims about his food, which in itself shows how illness may alter a man's ways, for in health I don't believe that he so much as knew what went between his lips. Yet he was patient all the time, and, if he couldn't get what he fancied, would do his best to pretend to fancy what he got, which made me the more anxious to indulge him whenever that was in my power. And he having taken it into his head one day to wish for mushrooms, I rose keen and early on the following morning to gather them for him, mushrooms not being esteemed wholesome eating in our part of the country, unless they be found with the dew upon them.

I was out before sunrise, which in mid-September would be soon after five o'clock, and I went barefoot, as my shoes would have been soaked before I had trodden a dozen yards of the grass.

It was the likeliest thing to a holiday which I had enjoyed in many a long day, and all looked so pretty abroad, from the stars fading out of the blushing sky, as the dewdrops disappear from a bunch of roses in the sunshine, to the sparkling threads stretched between tall stalks of grass and purple flowers in the hedges, that my heart's load of care turned to one of thankfulness for the boon of beauty which day by day is lavished on the world, without respect to the worth of gratitude of those who receive it.

The excitement of hunting for the mushrooms, and the triumph of finding them, kept my heart light. For they were not so plentiful now as they had been a week or two before, when at every sun's rising the pastures were white with them, and so the satisfaction of coming here and there upon a pearly group of them was the greater.

Soon, however, I had picked more than Jethro would have been able to eat in a week, and was forced to turn homeward with my full basket, for my work wouldn't wait, if the morning was fair.

The stars by this time had faded, with the rosy color, out of the sky, for the sun had leaped into it, and was already busy drinking the dew, and drawing giant pictures of poplar and elm upon the shining background of the fields. Only in the deep hollow where the church stood beside the farm, there was shadow, heavy shadow, always shadow as it seemed to me, beyond the power of any sun to brighten, or of the breezes that scoured the hill to blow away.

And, as I approached it, the waiting shadow fell upon my heart as well, so that I was scarcely surprised when a creeping figure stole from behind the cow-yard gate, as I lifted the latch of it, and I looked up to see Betty Castle stand there before me.

"Where have you been?" she demanded suspiciously. Then, as her eye fell upon my basket of mushrooms, her brow cleared.

"I thought that you were too soon abroad," she added, to explain her question; "and I'd wanted to catch you about the place. Pounce passed me while I was hid. Is it true that he's said he'll set his dog on me?"

"I've not heard him say it," I answered, wondering what she could want with me, but for some reason unable to ask her as much.

She, however, did not wait to be asked.

"I've brought bad news, which I'd have given to Jethro, but they say that he keeps his bed now. Is that so?"

"No. What news?"

"The police are busy about you here. Not my doing, I swear! But with the talk there's been, and one thing and another, I couldn't help it. Now what could I have done?"

While she spoke, I had time to observe how changed she was from the Betty Castle whom I had known, and had last seen but one short month before, in the moonlit garden.

No longer swaggering and insolent through consciousness of her power, she was to-day haggard and wan. Her brown skin had paled to yellow, her eyes were wild, and her coarse lip hung trembling. Yet she was still defiant, as a rat is before terriers when the holes are stopped, and there was as much fierceness as fear in the glance that met mine.

"The police?" I echoed.

"They've never been satisfied. Now they think they have a clue, as they call it, and the clue leads *here*. There's been a coming and a going, which I've watched, between our old man and the rest in Oxford. Now they've got one of those grand detective fellows from London. I have my eye on him, too. I know all about him, though he may

think that he keeps himself close!" She showed her teeth like the rat that I've spoken of.

I was speechless, thinking of the stranger who had questioned me, and of Jethro as good as helpless. My eyes turned to his window.

"You're going in?" Betty said. "No time to lose! Tell them what I've told you, and that, if they value their lives, they must get me away."

"You?" I asked.

"Yes, me. If I'm here, they'll be at me again with their questions, like they were at the inquest. They've got their grip on me. I feel it. I feel it in my bones!"

She shivered, wiping her lips upon her ragged apron. For the wardrobe which had excited the envious suspicion of our neighbors, had once more given place to one of the poorest.

"But," I objected, "if they got nothing from you at the inquest, why should they get it now?"

Her manner grew more flurried. She kicked a clod of earth impatiently.

"You don't see! How am I to know if they'll ask me the same questions? Or, if they do, how am I to mind what my answers were? Do you think that I set them down in writing, as they did—as *they did*? It's the thought of that writing, and how they'll catch me with it—ah, you don't know what it is to be so bullied and badgered!"

Her brow was wet with starting drops, but she laughed in bitter ridicule of my simplicity when I said:

“ So you didn’t tell the truth then? ”

“ Ask the Silvesters if I told the truth then, or if they’d have me tell it now! I thought myself at the time mighty clever with my answers. Now I wish that I’d only had the sense to hold my tongue, like John Pounce. They soon grew tired of asking *him*, for an idiot! ”

“ Dear God! ” I murmured.

The sunshine at last was stealing into the hollow. It touched us where we stood, but I for one was left with a heart unwarmed by it.

“ Well? ” Betty tried to give a nudge to my stunned senses.

“ What do you want? ” I said, repeating my first question dully.

“ I must go far, where they won’t catch me with their questions, and where the Silvesters won’t be caught with my answers. ”

“ Oh! ” I groaned, “ why couldn’t you stay when once you had gone? ”

“ What use to ask that now? ” inquired Betty.

And I acknowledged to myself that she spoke sense.

“ Then, ” I turned on her, half frantic, “ why do you linger? Why don’t you go now, in

God's name, and never let us see or hear of you again?"

"And how shall I do that, without a penny?"

"What!" I exclaimed brutally, "it's the same old story, is it?"

"No, it isn't," she replied grimly. "This time the story's like to have a different ending."

I tried to straighten my thoughts, which were as twisted and tumbled as the skein of fine silk which the girl in the fairy story had to wind for her cruel stepmother.

"So," I said slowly, "you expect the Silvesters to pay to save you from the consequences of your perjury?"

"I'm not such a fool!" she broke in eagerly. "If I'm saved from that, the Silvesters will only have paid to save their own skins. If I'm away they have nothing more to fear, and they know it."

I thought that her feverish anxiety now to be gone, agreed very ill with her former boasted willingness to tell what she knew, for a reward, and I hinted as much to her. Whereat her look fell.

"I could do it now," she answered sullenly. "They'd forgive me worse than perjury if I did. But, d'you see, I'd sooner act square by the Silvesters, for I began on their side."

I didn't believe a word of her professions, and I turned away sick.

"You're going to tell them?" Betty pressed me.

"I don't know."

"But you must know! There's no time for not knowing! And their servant can't refuse to deliver a message to them."

I could have thanked her for the quibbling words. For I had been sore oppressed by the memory of Mrs. Janaway's solemn admonition that to help wrong is to do it. And, though I knew in my soul that, whatever happened, and at whatever cost, I should help the Silvesters through thick and thin, to the utmost of my power, I was glad in doing so, to be able to stifle, rather than to go directly against my conscience. Therefore I turned to Betty, my mind made up.

"I'll take your message! And where shall I find you with the answer?"

"In the place where you found me before. I'll stay in the boat-house till evening, or till I see you. Take care that none catch you seeking me there. But give me some food now to carry with me, for I've not had a bite since yesterday."

I brought bread and meat out to her. Mr. Silvester was moving in his room when I went to fetch it.

"Tell them," said Betty, when she had received

it, "that if they will give me the means, I know how I may slip off this very night; and I swear to do it!"

They were the last words that I heard her speak.

CHAPTER XXII

CORNELIUS

AND now I had a task before me as hard to perform as any that I had done in my life. And that was to recount to Cornelius Silvester the news which Betty had brought. But there was no help for it, for it seemed still more impossible to go directly to Jethro with the story, and cruel, as well as useless, to trouble Mrs. Silvester with it. So I waited for my master, and as soon as I heard his door open I went to meet him in the passage.

It would be hard to say whether he looked more astonished or displeased at finding me there. But he would have passed me without speech if I had not barred the way.

"If you please, sir, I have something to tell you."

He started as if I had struck him, before he growled, "Ugh! Jethro dead, is he?" in a tone of resentment, as though he would grudge his nephew's escape, even through the gates of death, from the troubles which were crowding upon his family.

Up to this moment I had not guessed that Mr. Silvester realized so well what Jethro's illness meant, and now I was too greatly shocked by the tone of his question to be able to reply to it by speech. I therefore shook my head, whereupon he asked angrily what the devil I had then to bother him about?

"Betty Castle has been here this morning," I began, plunging directly into my story. And I never stopped until I had told him all, as shortly as I could.

Though his face grew ghastly while he listened, he did not interrupt me. And when he had heard me out, still without a word he staggered back to his room, and clapped the door of it in my face, leaving me to go crying to the kitchen, where I wondered to find myself shedding tears for such a man, but indeed his look had struck at my heart.

Jethro had come to occupy the seat under the tulip tree, where he now passed the greater part of the day, and Mrs. Silvester after breakfast had gone away to him there, before Mr. Silvester came forth once more into the parlor, where he tried to eat and drink as usual. But it was not long before he gave up the attempt, impatiently pushing his cup and plate from him, and his look was both grim and wild as he said to me abruptly:

"Where's Jethro. I've to speak with him."

I fell to begging him not to do so, it being as much as his nephew's life was worth to trouble him just now.

"If it kills him so much the better for him!" quoth Mr. Silvester. "But he needn't hope it—we are not a lucky family!" And with that he marched to the door.

I ran and placed myself against it.

"Look here, sir!" said I, swallowing down the fear in my throat.

He looked, indeed, in a pale fury at finding himself thwarted, and I felt that his gaze was piercing enough to have nailed me to the door. But I went on, trying to speak firmly in spite of it:

"If you will go to him I must be there too. For I can't have him hustled to his death without a soul to help."

"Do you think that *you* could help?" sneered the master.

"I must be there," I repeated.

To my surprise he gave in. "Go on, then."

Then he caught me by the arm. "But if I find you telling elsewhere a word of what you hear, God pity you, for I will not! And you should suffer—in your body—if the rope were round my neck!"

I shrank from the hideousness of the man as he

uttered the threat more than from any fear because of it. Yet I made shift to answer not too tremulously:

“ I shall not want to tell anything. I wish that I might help hearing. But he shall not hear and bear it alone! ”

With that, cursing me, he bade me go before, which I did. And when we came within sight of the tulip tree, the lump of terror in my throat was like to have melted in tears, for the prettiness and innocence of what we saw there.

Jethro, very comfortable among his cushions in the green shade, was smiling down at his cousin, who, seated on the grass before him, was talking—I knew just how—of this and that and the other, so that listening to her was like watching a dragon-fly, of which you can never say, “ It is here,” before it has darted elsewhere. For these two were at ease together now as they had never been before the approach of death had taken from Jethro his fear of life, or before Mrs. Silvester had learned to welcome for his sake the black sorrow which was waiting to overwhelm her, and for his sake even to sport in the shadow of it.

I turned to my master with a beseeching glance, and saw that his look too was fixed upon the pair beneath the tulip tree, before he dashed forward upon them, crying to Mrs. Silvester to be gone.

Then, as she leaped to her feet, scared like a wild deer, he furiously addressed Jethro:

"Is she bewitching you too? Sure, she's a vampire upon us! But you should be a man, if you are a dying one, for the honor of your name! Death won't absolve you if you forget it. No," he roared, turning again on my mistress, "nor you either! For there's no absolution in death, as you'll find when you stand upon the scaffold!"

Jethro was on his feet, white to the lips. "What does this madness mean?" he demanded.

"If I'm mad it's her fault, for the sight of her drives me so, and the longing for her undoing, which I'd give my soul to see, and which I might see even to-day——"

As he gazed at her his eyes grew greedy with hate, and his voice broke from the fierceness of a passion denied when he added:

"Oh, the *fool* to give you his name!"

It was pitiful to see Jethro in his weakness step before Mrs. Silvester to protect her.

Whatever his uncle might reproach him with, and whatever I might think of his conduct in allowing her to hear these things, he was a man yet. He turned to me:

"Margaret, can *you* tell me the meaning of this?"

I begged my mistress to go to the house, where,

as I reminded her, baby was by himself. And, seeing how her presence excited her father-in-law, so that for Jethro's sake it was better that she should be away, she took the hint, only whispering me timidly not to leave her cousin as long as the terrible old man remained there.

As soon as she was out of earshot I said to Mr. Silvester, in as matter-of-fact a tone as I could manage, "Shall you tell him, sir, or shall I?"

So Mr. Silvester, pulling himself together, succeeded in telling Jethro of Betty Castle's visit, and the news which she had brought.

When he had finished speaking, the two looked at one another for a while in blank silence. Then—

"There's nothing to give her," said one, yet with the note of a question, which meant hope, in his tone.

But the other echoed, "Nothing!" and bent his look upon the ground.

"If we had time—" mused Jethro.

"There's no time," broke in his uncle feverishly.

"That's a question. To-morrow, even——"

He fell to devising how a small sum might be raised in Oxford before the morrow. It was wonderful how clear-headed he was. He spoke almost cheerfully, but Mr. Silvester, with lowering looks,

was evidently deep in some different thought, taking in little of his meaning till Jethro said: "This has given her a fright, whatever her boasting threats may have been, and if she gets away this time she won't come back so soon. So that we shall be in peace, as we have not been since— For she is right, and, whether with her goodwill or no, she is our only danger. They *can't* prove anything without her."

The last words seemed of a sudden to have penetrated his uncle's understanding, and he looked up sharply, with cunning added to the fierceness in his eyes. As mine met them, my heart fluttered and sank like a stricken bird. Yet I could give myself no reason why this should be.

Finally it was arranged that I should seek Betty in the boat-house, and induce her to lie hid there, or elsewhere, until the night, by which time Mr. Silvester might hope to be in possession of a sum sufficient to enable her to get away, according to whatever plan she had formed.

He would himself start immediately for Oxford to arrange for this, which was deemed a safer and surer course than to attempt the same in Ryeworth or Budhampton, where he and his concerns were well known and overmuch talked about.

"I'll go this minute," I said, eager to be doing. But my master objected.

“Time enough! For she promised you to remain near the boat-house through the day. If you go after dinner, you are less likely to be observed, for in this weather few who can help it will stir abroad in the heat of the afternoon. And I dare say these spying scoundrels are as fond of their ease as others. Betty was right to warn you to be wary of their watching when you seek her.”

Jethro had nothing to urge against this, and it was all one to me. It never seemed to occur to the old man that his own journey to Oxford might be as well spied upon as mine across the fields, and he began at once to prepare for it. I must say that I was only too anxious to see him gone, and Jethro left in peace, for he had been sorely tried by the excitement and trouble of the hour, as I could see, in spite of the determined calm of his manner.

As for Mrs. Silvester, although at first she was uneasy, it was not hard to satisfy her as to the cause of the master's absence, while she was pleased as a child to think that we were to be for a whole day without the burden of his black look.

I agreed that at times it seemed intolerable.

“But you don't know how intolerable, Peggy,” she said, “for he doesn't hate you—Ah!” with a little moan, and a shudder, “If he might but have his will, and see me suffer—it would be over the sooner!”

I told her, with no very just idea of what I was talking about, that she should not speak so.

"But, Peggy, you don't understand!" she urged.

And I sighed. For they all told me this, while I considered that I understood everything only too well.

The sunshine lay like a burning plague upon the fields when I went out again, after our early dinner, to meet Betty Castle at the boat-house.

It was, as I have said, but a short walk to the little wood at the head of the lake, but, by the time that I had gained it, I was glad enough of the shelter of the trees. I had kept in mind Betty's caution on the subject of possible spies upon my movements, but had seen no sign of a living being while I crossed the open, while it was hard to believe that there could breathe another besides myself in the shady solitude where, when I stood to listen, the buzz and hum of insects was the only sound that I heard.

For the ground which in April had been a bog was to-day a desert of sun-baked mud, haunted by myriads of flies. Not a leaf stirred. Not a bird was chirping. Not even did the greasy water lip the shore by which it stagnated, foul with weeds and slime. So that such uncanny stillness I was

half afraid to break by the sound of my own movements, as I crept to the door of the boat-house, where, however, I forced myself to speak Betty's name, though it was in tones little above a whisper.

My eyes, at first blindly straining in the darkness, presently distinguished the rough, timbered walls, and the roof hung with cobwebs, upon which danced a subdued dappled light reflected from the waters without. And I turned to the murkiest corner of all, just within the doorway, where was the little standing-place, like a shelf, where Betty had crouched when I came hither before to find her.

"Betty!" I said, "it is I—Margaret. Are you within?"

I did not need the answering silence to tell me that she was not. Yet I entered, and stood upon the narrow platform myself, to feel about it with my hands, knowing all the time that they would touch nothing but the moldering boards.

"She has grown tired of waiting, cooped up within," I told myself then. "I shall find her hidden somewhere in the wood."

So I sought doggedly, diligently. All the more doggedly and diligently because I had from the beginning recognized that it was to be in vain, through the trees in every direction, and about each

bramble brake and thorn bush, even peeping between the stalks of the reeds and rushes at the water's edge, where Betty would have had to lie wet if she had chosen them for a hiding place.

I did not give up until I had plucked up courage to call once more, "*Betty!*" when something in the tone of my own voice, filling me with a terror that was not to be resisted, scourged me from the place. And with no further thought of the scorching heat, I fled over the fields, nor ever stopped until I had staggered into Jethro's presence, only to find that, fast as I had come, the horror which had found me in the wood had traveled with me, and that Jethro was startled to see it in my face.

"What ails you, Margaret?" he cried. "Has the sun touched and sickened you?"

I shook my head.

"Betty is gone," I panted.

"Gone?"

"She isn't there," I explained, as if Jethro had been stupid.

"What then? What are you thinking of, girl?"

"Nothing."

It was true enough. I had not dared to think since the moment which had convinced me that Betty was not in the boat-house. But Jethro's

shoulders moved impatiently at my dulness as he set himself to find an answer to the problem.

"It will be simple enough when we know," he said. "She always was a fibbertygibbet, and may well have wearied of waiting. Or something has scared her away. There may be a dozen reasons for her disappearance. We shall know them when she turns up here again, as she is sure to do before night."

"Yes," I assented.

Then Jethro fell to calculating the time when his uncle could be back. And I wondered to see him still ignoring what to me was more pitilessly clear than the sunlight. Yet he was not without anxieties, and, marking with what eagerness he turned his face to the door at every sound from without, I found it in my heart to envy him. For despair leaves no place for anxiety, and the last thing that I was wishing to see was Mr. Silvester riding the white mare home, as the last thing that I expected was Betty, creeping in with the evening shadows.

The sun was behind the hill, and twilight glooms filled the hollow when Mr. Silvester at last appeared. The white mare brought him, he having had the sense to give her the rein, and liberty to come as she chose, for, as was soon apparent to us,

he was himself capable of little more than sitting her.

Peeping from behind the parlor lattice at his efforts to dismount, I wondered idly at seeing him so unchanged outwardly since the morning. And when John had hurried to his assistance, I wondered again that the man could bear so to support his weight, with no appearance of shrinking from contact with it.

The liquor which he had taken apparently affected Mr. Silvester's legs alone. For, once safe upon the ground, he staggered to the seat within the porch, and sinking upon it, spoke sensibly to his servant. To my dismay, he asked for me.

I went to him, because Jethro, who was in the room with me, would have wondered if I had not. And, as soon as I had joined him in the porch, Mr. Silvester fixed his look upon me.

"Did you find her?" he asked thickly.

I shook my head. My eyes refused to meet his.

"Why—why not?" he stammered.

"I don't know," I answered, trying to keep my voice steady.

"You didn't go?"

"Yes. But she—wasn't there."

"Where was she then?"

His tone was threatening, and I fancied that it defied me to speak my thoughts. With an hyster-

ical impulse to tempt the worst, I looked full at him as I answered:

“How should I know? You can tell that as well as I.”

His gaze did not sink under mine, and he made no immediate reply, as he brought a greasy purse from his pocket, weighing it in his hands. He had then fulfilled his mission.

“Go again,” he commanded, “and take this with you. She may have returned.”

But at this I revolted, my self-command giving way as I cried out in horror:

“Nay, I’ll not go there by night. If you think that she is there, go *you*, and meet her.”

It only needed such opposition from me to raise the blind devil of fury, which was never far off when my master was in drink. He leaped at me, raising his riding-whip, and I set my teeth, thinking of Jethro and my mistress within.

“If I can help it I won’t cry out,” I promised myself. And, thank God, it was no cry of mine which brought Jethro to the door.

I may scarcely tell what came after that. It was all so confused, everything happening as quickly as it does in a dream, with no apparent reason for its happening, yet without any surprise at it in the mind of the dreamer.

So it was without surprise, though with a feel-

ing of sickening horror and alarm, that, after the struggle of a few minutes, I saw both men fall together to the ground.

Jethro was above, but the other rolled from beneath him, kicking, swearing, grasping with blind hands for help to rise, which, however, I never thought to give him after I had bent over Jethro, and had seen that his face was marble-pale and his look fixed, for he had fainted.

It was in the same instant that my mistress came running out, and,

“Run to the stable, ma’am, for John Pounce!” I cried to her, without further explanation. For Jethro, wasted as he was, was still too heavy a burden for us to lift unaided.

She needed no second bidding, nor did she ask a single question, before she had disappeared again. And I can not guess how she prevailed upon the man to come with her at her bidding—for to know her to be going in one direction was usually all that was needed to send him hurrying in another—but even to my impatience it seemed but a few moments before we had Jethro lying upon his own bed, and my remedies at work.

Old John straightened his back, in which there was still more strength than in our young limbs. He was anxious for Jethro, as one might see by the look which he cast at him over his shoulder as he

shuffled to the door. But all that he muttered as he did so was:

“The master’s lying yet.”

And I have to suppose that the task which he next set himself was that of helping the old man to the bed where he might sleep himself sober. It was all in the day’s work to John.

CHAPTER XXIII

JETHRO'S STORY

MEANWHILE, "It should not have been like this," murmured my mistress. And again, "'Twas by a cruel road to take him."

She told me afterward that at the time she had deemed Jethro dead. Nevertheless she made no outcry, and appeared rather stunned, continuing still to help me as she might while I heated bricks for his feet, and fanned, and sponged his face with cold water. And what her thoughts were when at length he opened his eyes I may not guess, nor whether it was joy or suffering then which caused her to clasp her hands so tightly, for this was the only sign which her racked feelings gave.

As for Jethro, when he had lain for several minutes dully staring at her as his wits returned, and with them the pain of remembrance, first his eyes clouded. And then the muscles of his face began to work, uncontrolled and helpless, for he was pitifully weak, and he turned away quickly to the wall that we might not see him weep.

But this was not for long, and when he turned

again his lips were still and his eyes were dry, but they were not easy to meet. I could imagine such eyes in the face of a man who has leaped into a burning house to save his friend, and, overcome by the mastering smoke and flame, perishes with the death-cry of the other in his ears. They were the eyes of a man who has failed.

"Let her go out," he said, and pointed to my mistress.

I raised my head to plead, for the parting would come soon enough, and why hurry it? But I was too late, for she had scarcely taken his meaning before she was gone, with her meek head bowed.

And I saw his eyes again, while they followed her to the door, so that instead of uttering protest or reproach against his hardness to himself and her in sending her, my voice broke, while it tried to comfort him:

"She will come back."

He did not reply to this as he beckoned to me.

"Come near, Margaret, for I have much to say, and little time or strength to say it."

So I approached his bedside, feeling that surely all this had happened before, as I recollected how I had listened once when my mistress on her bed had related to me a story. And I wondered that life should thus drearily repeat itself.

"It can not last," said Jethro. "The time has come of which we once spoke—you have not forgotten, Margaret?—when you may prove your devotion to your mistress. The time has come. For now I must lay down the burden which I would still bear for her, but which has proved too heavy for me. And I have to ask you if you, in my place, will take it up, and bear it—for her?"

I have hated myself because I shrank then from what I thought was coming. The words which had darkened all that I had looked upon since I had heard them, repeated—and by Jethro—and by Jethro dying!

I bent my head, praying that my thoughts might be hidden from him. For I had sworn to my mistress never to reveal to him that I already knew the thing which he would tell me.

"Sit down," he commanded.

And so I took my seat where the light of the candle, that was shaded from him by the bed-curtain, fell upon my face, so that instinctively I put up my hand to cover it. But his, though in the shadow, was still clearly to be seen, so white it was, except where his eyes were dark. It was strange, I mused, that eyes should change so in an hour from blue to black. You see, dearie, how my thoughts were catching at any trivial straw that

floated by them, to escape being swept altogether away upon the flood of my great dread.

I know not how long it was that we stayed so regarding one another before he spoke again, and when he did it was in a tone of despair:

“ You will not understand.”

“ I can try,” I replied humbly, for I would not have him guess how little I cared to understand. But my answer did not please him.

“ If you have to try, you may as well give it up at once.”

But one thing consoled me afterward when I thought of it: which was that, before starting on his tale, he had had no thought to bind me to secrecy. For, though I might not understand, he knew that I should not betray.

He began suddenly at last, with the desperate plunge of an unwilling swimmer:

“ When Mrs. Silvester came here she was nothing but a child—only a little school-girl with her head stuffed full of romance, ignorant of all realities. My cousin had run away with her from school. God knows how he had come to her acquaintance there! ”

I knew well enough. But I would not interrupt him.

“ The first that we heard of her was upon the day when he rode with her up to the door, intro-

ducing her to us there as his wife. His father was—displeased. We could scarce prevail upon him to let her in.”

I thought of the picture which Mrs. Janaway had drawn of the savage man and his son fighting before the door, while the girl bride trembled outside the home where this was her welcome. And I wondered what Jethro's place and part in the scene had been. But still I said no word, and he continued:

“I suppose that that was the first intimation which she had of the nature of the fate into which she had plunged so recklessly. But a rougher one was soon to follow. For *then*, at least, Ambrose had been on her side.”

He paused again, his face working, whether in reality from emotion, or seemingly through the flicker of the shadow upon it, I could not tell; but, feeling that now surely it behoved me to speak lest he should consider my silence strange, I made shift falteringly to ask:

“Then afterward he—wasn't kind?”

Jethro's low laugh in its bitterness was like a sob of pain.

“*Kind!* Margaret, her life with him was a thing which it was torture only to see, as it is still torture to think upon!”

His look and tone were in truth those of a man

tormented. But I never thought to beg him to spare himself.

"He is dead," Jethro went on, "and so far as he is concerned all would be best forgotten by those who can forget. But if I don't make you realize it you will never be able to comprehend—what came after. He tired of her soon. From being the idol of a moment she found herself unable to please him in anything. How should she? His tastes were gross. The wonder is that he had ever been attracted. Still she tried her hardest to keep what she had had. For she could not at once grasp the fact that she had lost it forever. And it was pitiful to see her then, pranking herself in little fineries, practising every simple art she knew which might lure him, gay when her heart was breaking, forcing laughter while she swallowed tears curbing the high spirit which might scarce endure a check until it bowed before actual insult. And all to no purpose. For he was weary of her, so that whether she smiled or wept, chided, spoke, or kept silence, she did the thing that disgusted him. She could not open her lips without hearing him reply with a sneer or a reproach. He made her his slave, and when she fainted in his service he threatened her. When he was in drink it was only"—Jethro hesitated—"only because of a chance that he did not strike her.

I believe that he has done *that* when none were by."

My heart was aching to hear him, so that I moaned from the pain of it. And, catching the sound, he looked up keenly, his eyes gleaming out of the white shadow of his face.

"You begin, perhaps, to see—to feel what it was?" he demanded eagerly. "And for one, too, who had hitherto known nothing, even by hearsay, of the hard things in life, and to whom the gentlest revelation of them must have come as a shock! Can you wonder if she was distracted, maddened, by what she bore? If at last she *could not bear it?* —Margaret! What is that you say?"

I had said nothing, for the good reason that I could not have spoken. Bewildered, blinded, it was in vain that I tried to see by what path he would lead me.

"Ah!" he exclaimed bitterly, "didn't I say that you would not be able to understand? Yet can you not imagine it? Another might have been crushed and cowed, but although I have seen her tremble it was not from fear. She was passionate. She could have loved, as few women know how. She could hate; but she could not be indifferent nor resigned. It was her husband's fault that she did not worship the ground which he trod upon. It was the fault of her temperament if she came to

loathe the air which he breathed. You have now heard what makes it imperative that you should hear all. Only do not dare to judge her! Remember that her child was coming, and that she was harried by constant cruelty and oppression. She was not responsible for what was done."

I bowed my head. There was little need to forbid me to judge her.

When Jethro spoke again his voice was low.

"I have not told you the worst. We have found that before this Ambrose had played a villain's part to the wretched girl whom you have met about the place. And he dared to bring her as maid where her presence was a daily outrage, allowing behavior in her which no mistress could brook, and turning a deaf ear to his wife's appeals. For *she* could not understand, and was not of the women who can guess, what such a thing may mean, so that her want of comprehension might have shamed another man. But this one found his pastime in it, while Betty raged like a wild bull in a net. For the girl was a savage, but it was for him to make her worse, and she had feelings and instincts then which he could trample upon and deride. One evening, however, being in liquor, he goaded her too far. And then—his wife learned the truth."

Jethro paused, his haggard face in the half-

light seeming to me distorted, formed of strange patches of white and black. But, truth to tell, my eyes were not seeing very clearly. He continued:

“Mrs. Silvester would have fled then, who knows where? *She* did not know nor care. And when prevented, she became a terrible thing, so that for once even Ambrose was cowed. Then the victim of his lust must fall victim to his cowardice. That night he turned Betty out of doors. In the morning he was found dead.”

Terrible words these! Words to crush the heart of whoever heard them. And yet, as I listened, my own heart was racing wildly, like a hound long held in leash, after the quarry of my thoughts. But hark! what was this that Jethro was saying?

“It was to his father that Ambrose’s wife confessed her crime, declaring herself ready, and even eager, to bear the consequences of it. But the boon which she craved was denied her by him, though he might sicken to be avenged upon her. For the Silvesters have a strange pride of their own at which even I, a Silvester, must wonder, seeing how little cause they have had to vaunt their name, or how little care to keep it unsullied. Still, on occasion, they have not been backward in sacrificing to it, and Cornelius withheld not his sacrifice when he

forbore to deliver the Silvester whom he hated to an ignominious punishment."

He paused, perhaps wondering why I did not speak. But how could I, when my brain was bursting, and I knew not yet whether it were from terror or relief?

Yet my silence might be misunderstood, and so, dazzled, scared, confused, I looked up, searching desperately for words—any words—to break it.

"The fire?" I stammered. And afterward I wondered why I had hit upon anything to say so far from my thoughts as the fire was then.

"That came afterward," replied Jethro shortly. And I shuddered.

After a pause, however, it seemed that he had decided to follow the lead which I gave him.

"We ran a risk of burning the house," he said, "and at the time we were almost too reckless to care if we did. That the place was saved, while our purpose was effected, was due to the care and exertions of John Pounce. He had, of course, to share our secret, and we knew that his faithfulness would not fail us. But danger threatened us when, in the midst of all, Betty Castle appeared, to collect her belongings as she said, and we failed to deceive her. So she also entered by force into our confidence, and we have been in her power since. You have seen how she has chosen to exercise it."

Jethro seemed scarcely able to speak the last words. His voice had dwindled to a thread of sound. His head fell back. I rose, and bent over him.

"Enough," I said, "and more than enough! You should consider yourself."

But he pushed me back from him until he could look into my eyes.

"Why do you suppose that I have told you this, Margaret?" he asked.

As I shook my head, he went on slowly and emphatically, though in that poor skeleton of a voice of his, which I had to stoop to hear:

"You must save her! And chiefly from herself. You know her, passionate and impulsive. She has been ready, as I have said, to give way to her despair, to run abroad and publish her crime, and *have done with it all*, as she says. That is why you were so strictly charged to allow no talking of the past, and why she has been guarded like a prisoner, permitted no communication with the outside world.

"And you have as well to be watchful and brave, to save her from danger from without. For, according to what you learned from Betty Castle this morning, suspicion is not yet dead, and those who suspect are active. You must use your care, your wits, your liberty and life, perhaps,

to prevent the worst from happening. And, alas! I can not tell you how. For I am spent. I have done all that I could, and have not done enough. Before long I shall be able to do nothing. God knows why I should expect you to devote yourself! —*will you, Margaret?*”

CHAPTER XXIV

AND THE END OF IT

My hands were pressed upon my eyes while I tried to collect my thoughts, to recover as it were the balance of my mind, and to grasp the fact which had all but stunned me when I recognized it. Jethro, too, believed in the guilt of his cousin's wife!

Not, as she herself did, in the guilt of her thought outweighing that of his deed, but in the actual guilt of her hand. That was the idea which seemed to me to be striking fire out of the darkness in which we had groped so long. For it meant that Jethro himself was innocent. But what else it might mean there was no time then to consider.

I dropped my hands to look at him. How should I break to him what I knew?

"Mr. Jethro," I stammered, "be of good cheer."

His head moved slowly from side to side upon the pillows, while his eyes closed, perhaps from weariness of body, perhaps from impatience at the vanity of such an attempt to comfort.

And in the same instant I was struck by a fresh thought, which urged me to ask him quickly, albeit as calmly as I might:

“Why, then, where were you? Where were you, and what did you *that night*?”

He opened his eyes and returned my gaze, at first a little surprised, as it seemed, by my question, but in no way resenting it. For in all that concerned himself Jethro Silvester was simple and humble as a child.

But immediately some bitter memory of an old anguish which my words recalled, reaching lean hands out of the past, laid hold upon his soul again, to wring it until his brow was contracted with pain, and he might scarce give utterance to the speech which should reveal it.

“In the fields—for I had myself to battle with, and that was easier done under the sky. Had I remained, it might have been better—it might have been worse. Who can tell? Who can undo what he has done, or to-day perform the task which yesterday he refused?”

I was in no mood, however, to listen to such hopeless philosophy, as I cried:

“There have been wrongs done which, thank God, may yet be undone, and which *must* be undone,” but there I broke off, aghast, as I asked myself whether any two who had loved had ever be-

fore by their thoughts wronged one another as these two had done? And where might the undoing of such wrongs begin? And with that my brain began to burn, and a sudden rage—which was, notwithstanding, devoid of wrath—possessed me, so that I exclaimed:

“You forbid me to judge her, while you sit in judgment! And what does your judgment mean, or what is it worth? For can one be guilty and not guilty at once? And if you *know* her innocent, as *you do*, how can you still *believe* her guilty?”

Such a sudden attack upon him, as unprovoked seemingly as it was unexpected, outraged Jethro, as well it might. His eyes blazed, but, without waiting for him to speak, I went on passionately, feeling that now all must be said.

“Leave judging then, and listen to the voice of what you know.”

It might have been his uncle’s face which glared at me from the pillows, and for the first time I then recognized a likeness between the two. But Jethro by an effort controlled himself, as his uncle could not have done.

“Have you dared to mistake me?” he asked sternly. “Would you imagine that what you have just heard was told *in accusation* of her? Or that she needs your defence? My choice was small in-

deed when it fell upon you to aid. But, purblind as you are, do you not see that she may even now be in desperate need of help, and that none can help her who do not recognize that need?"

"Even so!" I answered boldly. "But supposing that through dulness, or perversity if you will, I should find it impossible to recognize the need without proof—you have no proof of it to give me? Other proof, I mean, than her accusation of herself. *That* I may easily believe, and without proof, because I see a reason for it which my heart does not contradict."

As he gazed at me, wide-eyed, his anger forgotten in wonder, I went on:

"I see that her soul is conscious of a crime that bows it to the dust. To swear love and allegiance to a man, and then to *loathe the air which he breathes*—the words are yours, Mr. Jethro—is that a crime or no? It is not for the untempted to answer that question. My mistress, who was tempted, has asked it of herself, and has answered it."

I paused, but he uttered no sound. Only his burning eyes devoured me, while with an unconscious gesture he threw out his hands, perhaps in protest against my words, perhaps to drag from me further speech. I continued as if I debated with myself:

“And so, acknowledging herself guilty in thought, although she knew herself innocent in deed, she has bowed herself to bear the whole burden of the guilt whose consequences also she would have borne, if she might. For her tormented conscience has told her that she deserves them, while her rebellious heart cries out that she *alone* deserves them, and accuses her to herself even more bitterly than she is accused by her conscience, lest—it should have to accuse another!”

Jethro lay pale now and rigid, without a sign of life anywhere save in his eyes, and I began to be afraid of what I was doing. If the remedy should be too desperate after all!

Then I saw his brows knit, and I knew that he was thinking, searching his thoughts for the name of the one whom Mrs. Silvester's heart would not accuse, and I imagined that I could decipher those which his mind was passing in review: Cornelius Silvester, as he had been on the night of his son's death, stretched like a log, and, like one, incapable of evil as of good; John Pounce, faithful, dull-witted, without enough imagination for revolt or even question, stolidly accepting persons and things as he found them, and leaving them neither better nor worse than they had been; Betty Castle, whom Jethro had himself watched go forth, carrying with her whatever of hatred or desire for

revenge had been added to the burden of her sin and shame.

"There remains one," I said softly, "and she had seen you struggling together."

At the moment I was unconscious of the slip which I made—for from Jethro I had heard no word of any struggle with his cousin—but neither did he heed it in the trouble of his other thoughts.

His face changed, but it was not for me to read its expression.

"She thought—" he stammered, "she thought—" and could go no further.

"Yes," I answered, "she thought—and you thought—although both of you knew! Ah, why couldn't you both believe what you knew, without thinking?"

That he had known it indeed is shown by the fact that now he needed no proof, and questioned me no further while he lay, occupied only with the realization of the one truth of her innocence, and what it should mean. His limbs relaxed, settling themselves in comfort like those of a weary child. His breathing became less labored. It seemed to me that his face lost something of its pallor and strain. And hope, which I have always been too ready to entertain, rushed into my heart, as for a wild, glad moment I asked myself whether this inward peace, his portion after long unrest, should

after all be what was needed to work his body's cure? Whether God would will yet to bless him with an earthly joy? And her—and her?

I do not know how I managed to find my way to the door, for my head swam, and lights seemed to flash before my dazzled eyes, while a rising storm in the night without filled me with a strange excitement. But when I had opened it, it was to see the long dark passage leading to a window where a patch of sky, with its moonlight and blown clouds, was squarely framed, and against this the outline of Mrs. Silvester's head.

“Come!” I called softly.

Margaret's voice had dropped, and her face was solemn and shining. I laid my head against her knee, and took her hand to hold it to my burning cheek.

“Tell me no more,” I whispered.

And “Nay,” Margaret answered wisely, “there is no need to tell you.”

“But,” I asked then, low, for I was half ashamed to ask it, “there was then no fretting because—because of what each had believed?”

“Nay, dearie,” Margaret replied again. “For they had but erred with their understandings, while the heart of each stood true. If their hearts had followed their judgments, to believe each in the

other's guilt, then might love have failed, and a wrong been done for which no fretting or repentance could have atoned. And once, indeed, while they talked together there was a murmur of *forgive!* But the answer came immediately, and upon a triumphant note: *You know that I can not!* Fretting? No, indeed! There was no time to lose in fretting."

"Then your hope—?" I faltered.

"Was too bright to live," Margaret replied with her grave smile.

For Jethro's hour had come with its call, and neither sorrow nor joy might hold him now. And he went in peace.

It was near midnight, and I was listening to the rising wind, all being so still inside the room that I thought Jethro and my mistress must be dozing, he lying easy on his pillows, and she curled upon the floor beside his low couch with his hand in hers, when suddenly a faint cry roused me. Hurrying across to them then, I saw, as I had seen once before, a crimson stain from his mouth which soaked its way across the sheets. And my heart stood still to see it, for this time I knew that it must be Jethro's life-blood which flowed. Yet he showed no sign of pain, except by his broken breathing, together with a wandering movement of his limbs as though he reached abroad for air. And I fan-

cied him unconscious, while we did as much as we could and half hoped that so he might pass, knowing nothing of the parting of the ways.

But now the wind, which had long sighed and moaned about the house, rustling the ivy, and creaking the rusty vane upon the church, rose suddenly in its might with a conquering roar, and rushed upon our dwelling. The building shook beneath the wildness of its onslaught, its timbers complaining like those of a ship in heavy seas. And the curtain across the half-opened casement was driven inwards with a gush of moonlight illuminating the bed and Jethro's face. And I saw that his eyes were upon my mistress, and that they knew her.

Then he spoke. Alas! what use to forbid it now, to thwart him, and perhaps prolong his life for an hour?

"Once again," he entreated.

She bent to him, agonizing to give him all—anything—that he desired, if she might know it. And he groped for the hands which she surrendered to his feeble clasp, as his words dropped, one by one, like the dropping of pearls from a broken string.

"Once—when your eyes opened—and saw me—they smiled on me. Only once—like that—in my life. If I might see you smile—on me—so—only once again—my beloved!"

Surely he could know nothing of the cost of what he craved! But she gave it to him, though it might break her heart, bravely, holding up her head, until her quivering lips could smile no more, and the love-light in her eyes was drowned.

Then, knowing not where to hide her face, because her hands were in prison, she buried it beside him, while helpless sobbing shook her, and the moonlight from behind the swaying curtain played bo and peep across her.

"Once," Jethro whispered again, so that one might scarcely hear him, "the smile upon your lips. And now your tears—in my breast! God has been good—good!"

A moment of silence, and then her hands were free, for his were flung wide. There was a breathless pause and hush in the wind, in which the curtain was sucked backward upon the window frame, so that the bed's head, shaded from the candle, was blotted in darkness. Afterward, a far trumpet-blast, with a rush of garments flying, or perhaps of banners streaming in the air. And a face that was strange to us meeting the moonlight on the pillow.

CHAPTER XXV

HOW CORNELIUS KEPT HIS OATH

It was morning twilight before I laid me down beside little sleeping Ambrose upon my bed, leaving those two, according to the desire of my mistress, alone together. And then I dozed, simply because my body would not wake any longer. But still my brain refused to rest, and my slumbers were troubled by dreams so wild, and yet so vivid, that even now I may scarce distinguish between them and the realities to which I soon awoke.

For the first thing which I knew after having slept was that there was a violent knocking upon the outer door of the house, when, although it was past my usual hour for waking, it was yet so early for any to have come to the farm from without, that at first I imagined that the sound must somehow proceed from the wind, still at riot in the tree-tops and great chimneys of the house.

As it continued, however, becoming more and more insistent, I hastily slipped some clothes upon me, and put my head out of window to discover what the cause of it might be. And thence, al-

though I might not see the door itself, which was hidden from me by the projection of the porch, I soon perceived enough to make me wonder whether I were not dreaming still. For at each corner of the garden I beheld a man who seemingly kept a watch upon the house. And while I marveled at them, two more approached from the other side, where were the barns and stables, with the loft inhabited by John Pounce. And who between them but John himself a prisoner, as I guessed by the way they were holding him, each by an arm, but with no appearance of fear nor of fluster in his countenance, which was wooden and inexpressive as ever.

I had scarcely taken in so much before the knocking was resumed with redoubled vigor, so that it seemed to be full time for some of us within to be doing something, if we were not all to be deafened, or the door battered in.

And so, leaving my chamber, I was no sooner in the passage outside than I heard my name called from below, and, peeping over the stair-head, beheld my master upon the threshold of his own room looking up at me.

"Quick! Come down," he said. And I obeyed him gladly, for, scared and bewildered as I was, the prospect of direction, even from him, was welcome.

Yet Mr. Silvester's face at that hour, and after his yesterday's excesses, was no reassuring sight. For his savage eyes were blood-shot. The thick gray hair rose shaggy and tumbled from his wrinkled brow, and the unshaved stubble about his lips turned the grimness of them into something of an animal ferocity. Still, notwithstanding its ugliness, there was that in the upturned face which drew me, so that presently I stood below beside my master in the passage.

His orders were brief and plain.

"I shall hold the stair. There, where it narrows to turn the corner. I can do it against any odds, for almost any length of time. And when I say *Ready*, do you open the door to them. Then run in, and pass me, to join your mistress above. And hold her in her chamber until I have settled these fellows—or they have settled me. If I have ill luck, and they pass me, you must get her away—anyhow—out of her window, and down by the tulip tree—and anywhere. Jethro will help you. He knows that *she must not be taken*. But, devil take the fellow, he sleeps sound!"

As he finished, the blows began for the third time to rain upon the door, and he started up the stair, cursing Jethro as he went for a lazy hound and a coward.

Afterward, it was but a moment before I heard,

above the fury of sound that seemed to fill the house, the sharp word *Ready!* And with fingers that trembled so as to be almost useless, I attacked the bolts and bars. When those without heard me working at them the knocking ceased, to my infinite relief, for the noise had been a terror in itself. But, though I had drawn the last bolt, and had wrenched the great key round in the lock, I found that I could not yet open, for that the door was held from outside, whence a voice parleyed with me.

“Who are you?” it said.

And I answered, “Margaret Donne,” in tones that trembled as badly as my fingers.

“The servant?”

“Yes.”

“Who are with you behind the door?”

“None, indeed!”

So the door opened of a sudden, and one, two, three men sprang into the passage, one of them being the Ryeworth constable, and another the stranger who had before visited the farm, when he had questioned me over a glass of water.

It seemed that none of them was inclined to trust my word too well, for one immediately turned a suspicious look to the right and another to the left, in the entrance, while each seemed prepared to resist attack from any ambush that might be there. The third addressed me:

“Where are Cornelius and Jethro Silvester?”

I pointed within to where my master stood upon the stair, but I might not speak. For I feared to announce to them the news of Jethro's death in the night, of which he still remained in ignorance.

“Can't you answer?” urged my questioner. “Now I warn you not to trifle with us. But speak up honestly, and there's nothing for you to fear. We suspect that a young woman is concealed——”

I heard a sudden movement, and the hard breathing of Mr. Silvester behind me, and I felt through all my nerves the impatience with which he endured my slowness to carry out his instructions. But how was I to hasten to my mistress, as he had bidden me, or indeed move at all, as long as I remained, as now, a captive?—one of our visitors having held me since his entrance by the wrist. He shook it a little to emphasize his words.

“You must at least know where your masters are,” he insisted.

“Yes,” I faltered. “They are within. If you would let me go to tell them—that is, Mr. Jethro——”

He did not follow my suggestion, but held me on the contrary a little more firmly, as he asked encouragingly:

“Well? Where has Mr. Jethro gone?”

"Nowhere. Only—he isn't here."

"The girl's an idiot, like the fellow outside!" broke in another impatiently. "Don't waste time with her, but go in and search for Cornelius Silvester."

"Cornelius Silvester is here!" my master's deep voice interrupted, so suddenly that I started, as well as those who had not known of his close whereabouts. "May I beg, sirs, that you will approach, to acquaint me with the meaning of this intrusion into my house at such an unseasonable hour?"

I had never known Mr. Silvester, who mostly ramped and raved if he were crossed, play the offended yet dignified gentleman after this fashion, and I could not help thinking how well, for all his wild aspect, the part suited him. He added to me:

"And you, Margaret, run up and see to the child. I hear him cry, and it may well be that he is terrified by so much untimely and unmannerly clamor."

I started to obey, knowing well why the order had been given, when my chief captor interposed:

"Asking your pardon, sir, the girl will stay where she is for the present. Here we have—" He nudged the constable, who, with an air between importance and discomfort, drew a paper from the breast of his coat, and cleared his voice to read.

"I can't hear you there, Burslam," interrupted my master with some impatience. "What is it? Swine fever? Can't you come in?"

The man went forward sheepishly, pressed upon by the others. He was on nodding terms with Mr. Silvester, and had besides to struggle against that feeling of respect for an old name which it is difficult for a countryman to rid himself of entirely. It was easy to see that he was upon thorns.

"Beg pardon, sir!" he stammered. Then, pulling himself together, changed both tone and manner of address with a suddenness that was almost laughable, though you may imagine that I was at the time under no temptation to laugh at it.

"Cornelius Silvester," he announced pompously, "I arrest you on suspicion——"

"What's all this mummary?" interrupted Cornelius Silvester peevishly.

Now, while they had been talking, our visitors had drawn, unconsciously as it seemed to me, near and nearer to the foot of the stairs, from which Mr. Silvester did not descend, though it appeared more than once as if he were about to do so, as he shifted his position from one step to the next.

Now and then his eye met mine, with so plain a command in it that instinctively I sprang forward, only to be pulled back with a surly admonition to do as I was bid, and not meddle, or it would

be the worse for me. And at last the man who held me, being put past patience by my persistent disregard of such orders, thrust me bodily out of the house, with a brief injunction to those who kept John Pounce to keep me too out of the way. For, though I was not to be a prisoner like John, it appeared that I was, according to their great language, obstructing the law by my contumacy, and hindering its officers in the discharge of their duty.

It was by reason of this ejectment that I can not, as an eye-witness of it, tell you more of what immediately passed upon the stairs. But I will repeat to you as much as afterward came to my hearing, and was sworn to by the police officers in their statements.

It seems that upon my disappearance Mr. Silvester waited for no more, but turned himself about, as if he were going to the rooms above, throwing behind him an invitation to the three to follow him. And, having ascertained that they were doing so, at the narrow turn of the stair which he had mentioned to me, he wheeled again, with a suddenness that found them off their guard, aiming at the same time a blow with a loaded stick, which up to that moment he had kept concealed, at the head of the foremost of them, who happened to be no other than the unlucky village constable.

The man as he fell uttered no sound, and in-

deed he remained unconscious for so long afterward that his companions, who had little leisure in which to inquire into his state, believed him to be dead. Notwithstanding which, he ultimately recovered, though, as I have heard, never again to be altogether the same man as before.

Perceiving, then, that Mr. Silvester meant to make a fight for it, the two men left signaled for assistance to their colleagues outside, and one of these immediately joined them, but did not so materially better their case; for their adversary had chosen his place with judgment, only one assailant at a time being able to reach him there, while none were eager to close with him, having just seen the power of his arm too well displayed upon the constable.

They therefore tried parley first.

"This is madness, sir! You are one to three, and more of us are outside. Don't make your case worse by resistance."

But never a word in reply spoke Cornelius Silvester, who kept his watchful eyes upon them, while they whispered together.

Their consultation ended in one of them, bolder or more resourceful than the rest, making a sudden dart, like that of a snake, at his opponent, so as to catch him by the ankles and, as he hoped, drag him down.

But he had not taken into account the wariness and quickness of the other, which were more than a match for his own, in spite of Mr. Silvester's greater age and the stiffness of his joints. And the terrible loaded stick once more descending like lightning found his head and shoulders at its mercy, so that he suffered in the same manner as the constable, though fortunately, through some accident, with less severity.

So now there were two of the officers accounted for, while the fierce old man still stood there untouched. And at that something like a panic must have seized the rest. At least so I explain the action of one, which has always seemed to me as clumsy as it was cruel. And to clumsiness the man has himself confessed, swearing that he intended no other injury to Cornelius Silvester than a blow upon arm or shoulder, which should disable him.

His weapon was ready to his hand in the shape of a heavy pewter wine-flagon of an antique shape, standing between two candlesticks of the same metal upon an oak table at the foot of the stairs. These I took a pride in setting forth here, brilliantly polished, talking of them to myself pompously as *the family plate*. For the ruined family which I served possessed nothing else more worthy of the name, and my days of make-belief were not yet over.

And the flagon was the missile that was hurled with the man's full strength at my master, and, miscarried—or, as some declare, carried too well. For it struck him, not upon arm or shoulder, but with horrible force upon the side of his head, so that he reeled under the blow, then toppled, and fell.

In that instant we, outside the house, heard within it a roar like that of a wounded bull. And John Pounce, whom the sound stung into sudden fury, roared too, as I have heard a second bull answer his hurt brother, and struggled so violently in the grasp of the man who held him that it took all his strength to keep him, and I found myself for the moment free.

I did not wait before using my liberty, but was in an instant within the house, passing the constable who was stretched still unconscious upon the ground, and the other, who groaned while he held his head, and so to the side of my master.

He was as he had fallen, at the foot of the stairs. For those who had been scared by the ferocity of his resistance, and still more by the terror of the death cry in which he had owned himself beaten at last, were still unwilling to touch what they had made of him, though his hand was nerveless now and his voice hushed.

I knelt and saw that his gray head was lying in his blood, and that his fierce eyes were glazing. Yet I imagined that they recognized me, and that, voiceless, he strove still to urge me to something, impatient of my tears, for my heart yearned sorely because he was an old man and stricken.

So I choked down my sobs, to answer what I thought was the meaning of his silent pleading.

"She is safe, and I will be faithful," I said. "Trust me to be faithful with my life!"

And at that, whether he heard and understood and was content, I know not. But his eyes passed from me.

Then, seeing his limbs convulsed, I deemed that he would have struggled to arise, and passed my arm beneath his shoulders to aid him. But one of the officers held me back as he said:

"He's gone!"

"Well," replied he who had thrown the flagon, as though the words accused him, "then he shouldn't have resisted! You saw how it was, mates, didn't you, and that I acted from necessity? For I stood first of you, and what good to wait till he'd tumbled us all over, like poor Burslam there, or Jones?"

But I did not care to hear how he was answered. For I had to grasp the fact that Cornelius

Silvester was gone indeed, having kept his oath and fought to the death for one whom he had hated, because it was so decreed by the strange God whom he had so strangely worshiped under the name of the *Honor of the Silvesters*.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW THE LAW WAS DENIED

At my entreaty they carried the body from which the stubborn old life had been driven, to Cornelius Silvester's room within the parlor, and laid it there upon the bed. But they left me no time in which I might tend it, or even try to realize what had happened, before their voices were raised again, more harshly than before as it seemed, after the moment's solemn pause to which their sense of decency had compelled them. This time they demanded more strenuously to be taken to Jethro Silvester.

"What do you want with him?" I asked, looking up half dazed. And they answered me roughly:

"That's not your business! It's the law wants him, and the law won't be denied. Nor will you safely set yourself against it. If he's hiding——"

I saw no reason why they should not know the truth.

"He is not. He is dead."

At that they started, and stole glances at one

another, till one of them turned on me with a noisy laugh:

"Come, none of that! The trick's too old to take us in now."

"Besides," another added, "dead or alive, we've got to have him."

"Well," I answered, "will you come to him?"

Again in doubt they turned one to another. The bluster of the first speaker had died away, yet still he muttered warnings against a "trick," while a second whispered that my story might nevertheless have truth in it, since news of Jethro's sickness had already reached them. And this observation appeared to carry weight, for before I could come to any conclusion as to my own further action they had reached theirs, and bade me guide them immediately to where Jethro was.

As I went before them I was sore tried by hearing behind my own chamber door the voice of poor, hungry, little Ambrose, who was within, long neglected. But in the next instant even he was forgotten. For we had scarce arrived at Jethro's door before it opened, and there stood Mrs. Silvester, straight and pale, upon the threshold. I don't know how to describe to you her look, which was such that the men with me instinctively bared their heads before her, a thing they had never thought to do just now in the presence of death.

Yet she did not appear angry nor offended, neither was there any attempt to awe them by the majesty of a fine lady. She merely looked at them, with quiet eyes, which saw the unimportance of them, as she asked them simply and directly what it was they desired?

"We are looking for Jethro Silvester, ma'am," one of the officers answered civilly enough. And at that a little human feeling, a spark of faintest triumph, lit her face.

"You are too late!" she said.

Again they glanced at one another, and at me.

"The girl has told us so," said he who had spoken last. "But we must be satisfied that she has spoken truth."

"Come in, then, and see," said Mrs. Silvester as she stood aside.

Then, through the wreaths of mist which now seemed rising strangely between me and whatever I looked upon, I saw them pass to the bed, and remove hastily, yet without irreverence, the sheet which covered it, only to turn immediately away.

Their perplexity was evident and most natural, for certainly there could not have been in their orders any provision for such things as had come to pass! And the murmur of their voices, consulting together, continued until it was broken by the clearer tones of Mrs. Silvester, which I heard

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distinctly but as if they came from very far off, when she asked:

“What did you want with him?”

They treated her question more respectfully than they had treated mine when, a few minutes before, I had demanded the same thing.

“Nothing that need trouble you—or him—now.”

There was a pause before the man who seemed to lead them continued, in the smooth tones which had once begged from me a glass of water which he had not drunk:

“Yet, madam, if you will forgive our intrusion and persistence at such a moment, so far as to give us the information which may enable us the quicker to withdraw—there is here, as we have reason to believe, a young woman, by name Elizabeth, or Betty, Castle?”

My mistress turned sharply. Her eyes were like those of one who had been forced, or surprised, into viewing against her will an accursed sight.

“*Here?*” she exclaimed, with a gesture of revolt.

“That surprises you?” asked the man, gaining confidence in face of her emotion. “You are not aware, then, that yesterday at dawn she was observed to come in this direction? That she has not

since returned? Or that last evening a warrant was issued for her arrest?"

Mrs. Silvester's self-command had deserted her, with the stateliness of bearing that had impressed us. She was nothing now but a trembling woman, who leaned against the wall for her support. And I, alas! could not stir so much as a finger to help her, while her form flickered before my eyes till it seemed to have no more substance in it than a flame. Could she be trembling so much as that?

One of the dull, far-away voices addressed her again. No doubt its owner intended it to be respectful and sympathetic. That he had his own ends to follow was scarcely his fault.

"This must be very painful to you, madam—very distressing! Yet you will forgive me for surmising that possibly you know the reason *why* we seek——"

She threw out a hand to stop him from uttering the name. "*I know!*"

And at that another voice broke in sharply, eagerly questioning her, with no pretence at regard for her feelings:

"*Since when* have you known?"

"*Since—last night.*"

I raged then because I could not see her face. And, struggling to brush from my eyes the mist

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which had thickened before them, I found myself powerless to lift my hands. I shivered with cold, and with an unreasoning sickening dread, such as one has of the supernatural, as I asked myself whether it were she or I who was being swept so far away—so far beyond sight or hearing? I could not bear the separation. At any cost I must reach her! Desperately I urged my staggering limbs, went a step forward, and at the next the ground refused to bear me, and I felt that through it I was falling into a great abyss. Somebody called out, "Look!" and after that I knew nothing more.

"So you had fainted, poor Marget? And no wonder!"

I did worse than faint, dearie. For I went from unconsciousness into fever, and so lay raving, of no use to anybody, for more days and weeks than I like to think of.

The old doctor from Ryeworth said, like you, *no wonder*. For he declared that the long strain of nursing Jethro, with a constant fear hanging over me of some evil which I had to guard against without understanding its nature, was enough to account for my breakdown. And he did not know all. Anyhow, when the climax came, and Betty Castle's disappearance was followed immediately by Jethro's death, and his uncle's violent end, I had

no strength left to bear more, but just gave in, body and brain together.

And the doctor bade me be thankful when I recovered the use of both, bidding me likewise give thanks because I had been able to go on for so long fighting against odds. But indeed I found it hard not rather to repine, and to blame myself because in the sorest need of my mistress I had failed her.

Out of that evil, however, I must admit that there arose a greater good, with a comfort which lasted through her life. For it was when I was laid aside that the necessity of tending her child drew Mrs. Silvester's heart to him, and turned her thoughts from the bitterness behind her.

For bitterness can not live by a baby's cradle, though grief may watch there, and find its voice in a mother's laughter and her songs. And so, when I knew my mistress again, I found her transformed into a woman whose tears, flowing in secret, had sweetened the smile with which she still faced the world.

I lay through my illness in the house of Mrs. Janaway, who, out of true charity and motherly kindness, took me into it when the farm was left empty. For my mistress, with her child, had been removed to Oxford, where her presence was needed, they assured her, by the police and the lawyer peo-

ple who were inquiring into things, and being busy about her affairs.

And she never would tell me, but I could guess easily enough, something of what she had there to suffer when answering their pitiless questions, and giving public account of things about which she could scarcely bear even to think.

She would have taken me with her to the town to have nursed me herself, but the doctor forbade it, declaring that I should not live to be carried so far. So then Mrs. Janaway stepped in, and with her own hands tended me in her own home. Therefore I have always felt since that I owe my life to her care, and am still ashamed to remember what a hurry I was in then to escape from it as soon as I might.

My mistress, on her part, was shown great pity and attention by several ladies in Oxford, as she told me later, blaming herself in her turn because she could not afterward endure the thought of meeting one of them again.

"But they wanted to *know things*, Peggy," she explained to me one day in her own defense, "though already they seemed to know so much more about everything than I did myself. And I felt how they talked it over with each other, and how proud she was who had anything fresh to relate. And they were so important and so

busy in consoling me, when the only consolation that I needed was leave to creep away somewhere alone with my baby, where we might be lost for ever and ever!"

But everything was talked out at last, and explained and settled. And most of it was done before I was able to understand, or indeed allowed to hear, a word about it. And so it is but an uncertain account that I have to give you of what I gathered piecemeal after my recovery, of the events which passed before it.

It seems that the police had, a short time before her death, come upon some certain proof of Betty Castle's guilt, which accounts for their activity at that time. But what that was I can not tell you, for people said one thing and another, all being confused, and exaggerated beyond any appearance of likelihood. So that whether it were, as some declared, her own imprudent talk when under the influence of drink, leading to further investigation and discovery; or, as a few delighted to think, a blood-stained knife found in her possession; or her betrayal by gipsies with whom she had consorted during her wanderings after Ambrose's death; or the late coming to light of some fresh piece of evidence as to her doings upon the night of the murder, I neither know, nor greatly cared to inquire.

For it was plain to myself how the deed might have been done by her—poor, wicked thing!—returning in the dark hours by stealth, and mad to revenge herself upon her betrayer for his last and basest act of treachery toward her. For then my mistress lay, as she had herself described to me, too crushed and dazed beneath the load of her misery to mark aught that might be happening near her. And Cornelius was sleeping, heavy with drink, while Jethro had been driven by the stress of his passion and his pity where alone he might dare to confront them, as he had said, “under the sky.”

The only wonder is that none at the farm had suspected Betty at the time, or when her craze of terror at the approach of the police might surely have accused her to us as plainly as words could have done.

Yet perhaps it is not so strange after all that none of us had sounded the depths of the girl's cold-blooded audacity, which had allowed her to prey where another would have fled for her life. And the Silvesters had been misled by poor Mrs. Silvester's accusation of herself, while Betty had displayed a marvelous quickness in grasping the situation, and in turning it to her own sordid ends.

For when, impelled by what morbid instinct we

shall never know, she had returned for the second time to the house, there she found them in the grayness of the morning working desperately to conceal all traces of the crime which they had just discovered. And then, instead of revealing to them the bewilderment which she must have felt at the sight of their action, she set herself to discover a cause for it, half guessing, half worming from each his secret, until she was able to play off the fears entertained by the two men, against those of Mrs. Silvester for Jethro, and find a profit in all.

But it was her greed which in the end outran her cunning, hurrying her to disaster. For, as she discovered the value of her silence in the eyes of those who paid her for it, her demands increased, and her lust for gain, until she was reckless, and might not cease from getting, nor keep away from the place where she could get more.

And there, in the excitement of laying her nets for her victims, she took no heed of the one which the law was slowly but surely drawing round herself, until it was too late—though, after all, it was not within that net that she was caught.

There was a pause, in which I stole a glance at Margaret's clouded face, before I ventured to ask gently:

“And afterward, Marget—she was found?”

She bent her head.

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She was found in the water, close under the timbers of the boat-house, in which her clothes were caught. And none knew how she came there. *I do not know.* You must remember that, my dear!

CHAPTER XXVII

CONCLUSION

IN Margaret's story there were some details which still puzzled me, so that I asked her:

"Why should the police have come to arrest Cornelius and Jethro Silvester, if they knew by whom the murder had really been done?"

Because of their false swearing at the inquest (she told me) and because they had set fire to the dwelling-house, which, as I have learned, is a felony, even when a man does it to his own. And for the same cause was poor old Pounce taken, and the magistrates were obliged to commit him to take his trial at the assizes, having no authority themselves to deal with such a case.

But they accepted bail, offered for him by the doctor and Mr. Janaway, though, as I've been told, the Reverend Mr. Foley of Ryeworth had to talk over Lord Budhampton—both of them being upon the bench—before he'd do so, my lord saying very truly that perjury and arson are among the most serious of crimes.

Notwithstanding which the jury at the assizes,

when they met, found John *not guilty* on either count. And I've often thought, dearie, how well it is that juries are not bound to give the reasons for their findings. For absolute justice sometimes lies beyond the limits of reason, though twelve honest men may even then hit on a way to come to it.

So they let John Pounce go, and my mistress saw that a tiny pension was settled upon him, which should keep him from want through his life. For, although next to Cornelius he had been her enemy, she could bear him no ill-will because of that. But his pension was no great benefit to him before he died—in the union infirmary after all, he having no kith of his own to care for him when he grew past caring for himself, as very shortly happened. For it seemed that having so long lived with only the one thought—to do his master's bidding—he could not live without it. So that, the Silvesters being gone, his wits went away too, seeking them. And then he sat all the day through, scarcely touching food, and angry with any who approached him, even with kind intention, because they disturbed him, he said, when he should be listening for the master's voice to give him his orders.

And he listened for weeks and heard nothing. And he listened for months and did not tire. Till at length, upon a winter's day in the chill of the

morning, the night nurse going round to extinguish the lights found him struggling to leave his bed, but unable to do it, all his strength being gone. But the strained, listening look was gone as well out of the eyes which he turned upon her with the first friendly glance he had given her.

“ I’ve heard it! ” he cried, when she asked him what he would be doing. “ Master and Mr. Jethro have called me at last, and I’ve heard them! For they’ve carried Ambrose Silvester through the fire, and it didn’t burn them. And they’ve carried him through the water and it didn’t drown them. And they’re all three calling me now to come to them, through the fire and through the water! ”

Then the nurse saw what was about to happen. But she was a sensible girl as well as a kind-hearted one, so she didn’t try to force him back to bed, nor to soothe him with words which would have had no meaning for him. She only supported him with her arm as she said:

“ Through the fire, and through the water, you shall go to them.”

But he, plucking feebly with wandering fingers at her dress, and fighting for breath, made answer:

“ Through the fire, and through the water—with them—I have been! ”

And so fell back, making his escape into the regions where his masters had gone before him, and where he must therefore be.

My mistress wept tenderly when she heard of it, and had him buried at their feet, his name being cut upon their marking-stone, after theirs.

"Surely," she said to me, "faithfulness, like faith, may save the soul of a man, and he was perfectly faithful, Peggy."

"Surely!" I agreed with her.

But I could not help thinking to myself, at the same time, that it was old John's faithfulness which seemed to have created in him a soul to be saved. For without that virtue which some of us share with the brutes, and which in him shone so surpassing bright, one might almost have doubted his possession of such a thing as a soul at all, or good, or bad. But such musings I kept to myself, as I've said, for they wouldn't have pleased Mrs. Silvester, who had sobered much of late, and had grown at once more serious and more cheerful than I had ever looked to see her in her life.

"And there was no suspicion of blame to her in the eyes of the law?" I asked.

None. For it was certain that in nothing had she offended against the law. For, as she had told me, all that she had sworn to when questioned had been true; and if she had been aware, behind

that, of other truths about which she had kept silence, none might prove it. While any who suspected that such a thing might have been, were likewise of opinion that if she had held her tongue then, she had done it under compulsion and out of fear of her father-in-law and his nephew, and was therefore in very little to blame. But even this supposition was not put forward by the lawyers, for wherein would any now have gained or lost by it?

Some, however, if only from 'curiosity, would have been glad to have learned the motives which had actuated Mr. Silvester and Jethro in concealing the crime committed by a stranger and hireling against their own blood. And at the time there were many guesses hazarded upon this subject, all of them being, as you may believe, pretty wide of the mark, while, fortunately for me, it occurred to nobody that I might hold a key to the puzzle, while a great deal pointed rather to an opposite conclusion.

And people soon grew tired of guessing when nothing comes of it. So to-day there are none but Mrs. Silvester's son and I, and now you, my dear, who know or care what the facts may have been, and we wrong no one by keeping them to ourselves, with the secret of two hearts which have ceased to beat.

“She died, I know,” I whispered, “when Ambrose was still but a boy, and then our Marget came to us.”

Yes (Margaret assented softly), she died then, grudging nothing that life had cost her, because in it she had loved and had been loved—how well she knew at last.

For Jethro's passion for her had been no devouring flame, to scorch her whom he had loved, but had burned steady and pure as the beam of the lamp that never dies before an altar. And he had worshiped her as he pitied her, too tenderly to love her as men for the most part love, and, as I believe, as once she even desired to be loved by him. Yet he loved as few men can, for her sake overcoming the revolt of his heart against the bounds and barriers which he believed had been set between them, lest in breaking through them he should break her shelter too, so making her not free, but defenseless.

And she knew this when, in his last hour, she heard him render to God thanks for the good which had been his in the short life wherein he had chiefly encountered evil, keeping himself from its stain. When she knew that because she had smiled upon him, and because she wept for him, he felt himself recompensed for having lived and suffered.

There is little to tell you of the remainder of her quiet life in the cottage among beech-woods upon the banks of the Thames, where she fled as soon as she might from the noise of tongues, and the gaze of curious eyes, and the place that must ever be haunted for her by the ghosts of old miseries that would not be laid.

And there to the peaceful Berkshire hamlet I also went, as soon as I was fit to leave the hospitable roof which had sheltered me, for Mrs. Silvester would have it so. And you may guess how ready I was to go to her, and how glad to be there, in spite of the one small disappointment which there awaited me. For the baby had by this time nigh forgotten me, or perhaps he did not recognize me with my hair cut short beneath my cap. Anyhow, when I would have taken him in my arms, he turned from me to cling whimpering to his mother.

And although she pretended to chide him for his shyness, she colored brightly at the same time, and it was easy to see that she was as bashfully proud at this mark of his highness's favor as any maid to whom her lover will give sign of his preference beneath the eyes of others.

And I, striving with my heart, told myself that I rejoiced to see it, and told myself the truth. And yet my jealous heart would cry in spite of me, so

that I must have a care lest Mrs. Silvester should hear it, which would have spoiled all.

But in the end I subdued it, so that when my gentleman had learned to smile upon me again, and to pull at the bush of growing hair that had frightened him, I, too, had learned my lesson, and could be thankful for the second place in his affections, which I might assure myself—the old Adam or the old Eve being lively in me yet—was a long way in advance of any place that came after.

So we lived, he and she and I, in the small house that seemed hung like a nest in the high woods. And there the days slipped by as calmly as the shining river in the valley beneath us, while the bells in the white tower beyond the water reminded us to dedicate them, week my week, to the service and praise of God.

We were poor, for my mistress took seriously her office of guardian to her son, and grudged all that was not spent or saved for him. But little was enough for us. Neither was she any miser, as was proved by her generosity to John Pounce, and to me when a time came for her to exercise it on my behalf.

For my father died when we had been gone about two years from the farm, and it was to Mrs. Silvester's thoughtfulness and to her purse that we owed most of the comforts which surrounded him.

at the last, and which it was a consolation to be able to supply, though they might be little recognized by his failed senses.

I was with him when he went, but he did not know me, for he had become almost altogether unconscious of life, its blessings with its trials, as it drew toward an end. And indeed it was after he had ceased to breathe that he looked most like the father whom I had known when he and I had lived happily alone together in the little tumble-down cottage in Stadwell Street.

Immediately after the funeral stepmother gave up the house, and moved away to be with an aunt of hers living near Wallingford, where, as she said, if she had no burdens it would be easy for her to "scratch for herself." And it was seldom that she and I met one another afterward. But I think of her with gratitude, in spite of the sharp tongue which had kept father and me in subjection. For she had done her best for him, when he could do nothing for himself. And, in the old scant days, I had often seen her stint herself to spare me another morsel, which it choked me to swallow.

When she had gone I had no home but that of my mistress, which indeed was home enough for me. And in it we lived through our youth, and began to grow middle-aged together, but so easily that we

should scarce have been aware how time was passing if the boy had not been there to remind us.

For little Ambrose, whom, however, his mother would oftenest call *Noel*, grew apace, until it seemed but the morrow of the day when first he ran alone, that he must go to his first school.

My mistress bore up bravely till he was gone, but that evening she came wandering all forlorn into the kitchen where I sat, and asked me what I was crying for?

And when I answered, as well as I could for sobbing, that it was because I felt dull—for I missed having no muddy marks of little feet to clean from the floors, nor torn clothes to darn, nor scattered toys to lay away—she bade me, with a trembling lip, be ashamed of myself for a silly woman who didn't know when she was well off!

And at that I answered back boldly, requiring her to tell me, on her side, why her eyes were so red?

To which she replied, hesitating and blushing, that it was because of a foolish fancy which she had, that the child who had passed through the door that morning could never come back to her again, and that none who came in his place would ever be the same, nor so dear.

But time proved her wrong in this. For as her boy-child had been able to console her at last for

the dear lost dream of *Clarissa*, so the son who returned presently from school, laughing, and stamping, and talking big, was more than able to console her for the loss of the little child. And the greater boys, who followed him at each holiday time, were only more greatly beloved. Till dearest of all was the boy-man upon whose strength it was her pride to lean at the last, when he still sought and obtained help from her weakness.

I nodded. For now my own memory began to be busy upon the recollection of a certain tall young student, with a great laugh and kind eyes, whose periodical visits to his old nurse—our Margaret now—had been the splendid events of my childhood, and had continued until the youth was a man, and the child a girl who had learned one day that it was not Margaret only, nor even Margaret chiefly, whom Ambrose Silvester came there to see.

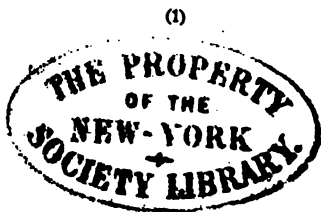
And then the visits had ceased, for what reason Margaret had just made an end of telling me.

“He would have you know what the Silvesters have been,” she said.

And I answered, “Then say to him now, Margaret dear, that I know it, for you have told it me truly. But there is still something which I desire to learn, which is what a Silvester is, and you can not tell me that.”

"No," she replied. "You are right, dearie, and I can not tell you that, for there is only one who may. So he must even come himself to do it."

And Margaret went away smiling.



THE END

1. The first step in the process is to identify the problem or issue that needs to be addressed. This involves gathering information and understanding the context of the situation.

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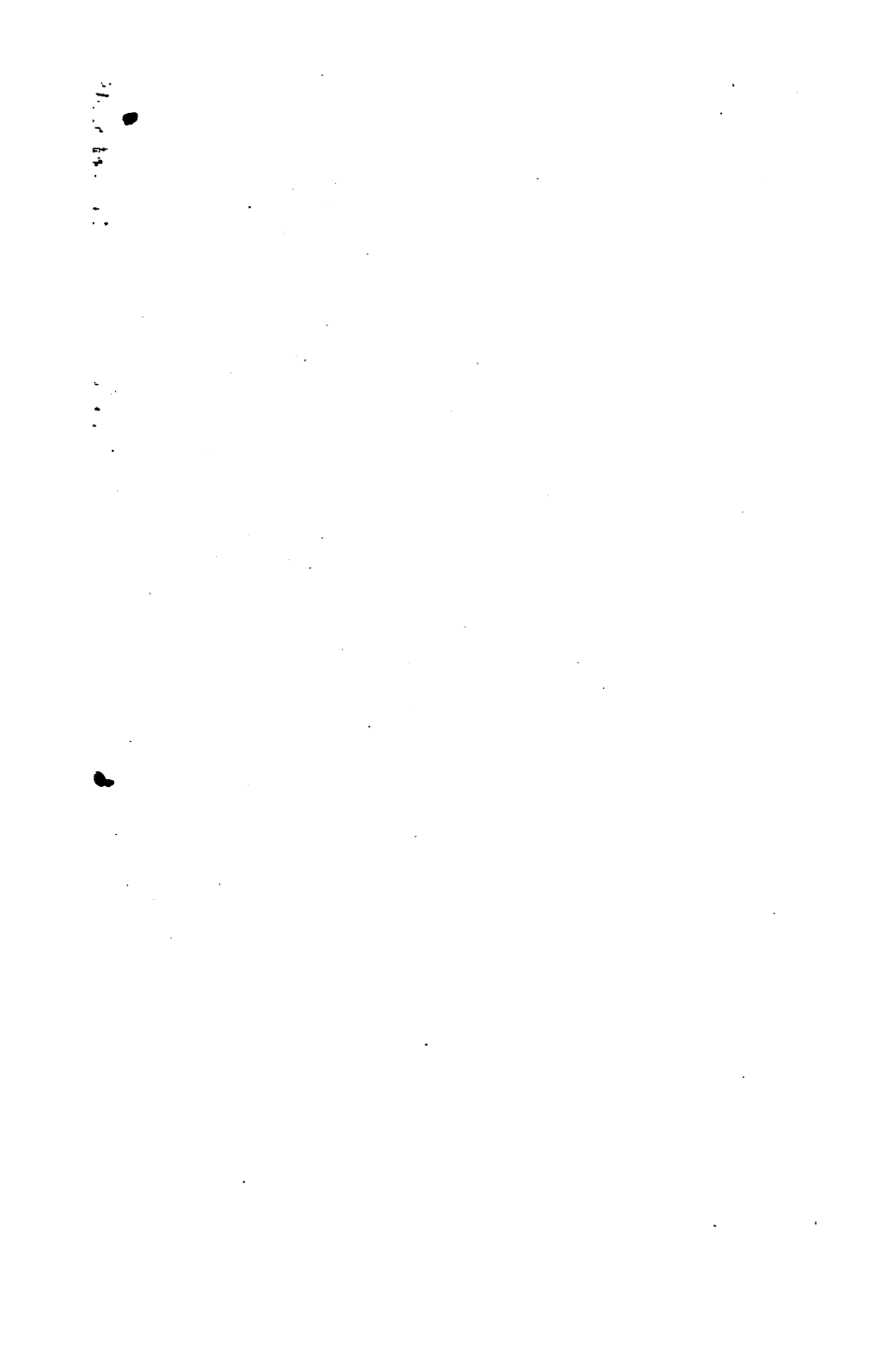
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